

K.D.Travadi - A Radical Visionary

by Shashi Tavares

February 2019

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Service to humanity is service to God

KD Travadi's voice, loud and clear, thundered across the Kenya Legislative Council chamber as he debated the White Paper on the Civil Service with Tom Mboya, on 16 December 1960.



Image 1: Karsanji Dahyabhai Travadi

He said: ‘... and I myself, am in my 44th year in this country - I have had my children and children’s children born here in this country and I call myself an African and particularly a Kenyan first and Kenyan last. If I go to India they never say, “Mr. Travadi the Indian has come, but here is an African”; they always take me as an African.’

Mr. Mboya replied: ‘Why object to being called an African?’

Mr. Travadi: ‘Exactly, but you have not adopted the word “African” yet; then why not use “Kenyan” or say that you are not excluding any of the non-indigenous people.’

He was seeking clarification of the word ‘Africanization’ as opposed to ‘localization’ from Tom Mboya, to ensure that ‘Africanization’ did not exclude any non-indigenous people, namely Asians and Arabs, from getting equal rights in the new constitution of the upcoming independent Kenya. Travadi (KDT) continued: ‘The Asians have been fighting in this country for the

last 60 years against the Europeans for domination by one race and now if the Africans are going to imitate the same thing then where is the common citizenship for all after Independence is attained?’ To prevent creating any wrong impression in the minds of the African community, he stated: ‘It is not our intention, Sir, to call for any privileged position.’

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Who was this fearless fighter for equality for Asians and Arabs in the new Kenya constitution? It was clear that KDT would continue to demand political, social, economic and educational equality from the new Kenyan government in the same way as he had demanded it from the colonial government for decades, and would fight to make sure that no group of people, irrespective of colour, caste, race or religion, would be forced to suffer subjugation and oppression from any government.

Kersanji Dahyabhai Travadi (1896-1961) was born in Jamnagar, Saurashtra, India in 1896, and came to Kenya during the First World War in 1917, to join his older brother, Ramakrishna. While struggling to raise his family and get established in a new country, he still managed to devote time and energy towards improving conditions for Asians, Arabs and Africans in this British colony where Europeans enjoyed the privileges of first class citizenship and the rest were relegated to second and third class status. A Gandhian and a pacifist by principle, he was an activist in everything else, pursuing his passion for justice and equality in every way he could: starting schools, heading committees and community centres, marching for the causes of the downtrodden, and taking an active part in politics. He also wrote prolifically in local and international papers in both English and Gujarati and urged everyone, young and old, male and female, educated or not, and religious or otherwise, to get actively involved in working for a free and democratic Kenya.

He was my father: a tireless and indefatigable worker. As member, secretary and later President of the Kenya Asian Civil Service Association (KACSA) from 1924 to 1946, he did much to secure better working conditions, salaries and living standards for its members.

After 29 years in the Attorney General's office, the last three being his accumulated leave (1946 to 1949) spent in England to qualify as a barrister at Lincoln's Inn, he retired from government service to engage in private practice. In 1958 he was elected to the Kenya Legislative Council and was one of the Asian delegates who attended the 1960 Lancaster House Conference in London, which paved the way for Kenya's independence. His contribution to the educational, socioeconomic and political development of the colony was immense.

Education

Travadi believed that education should be available to everyone, adults and youngsters, so that they would become economically independent and self-sufficient. He believed that there was a greater need for schools than temples, especially in a 'newer' country.

He was far-sighted and wanted multiracial schools with Swahili as one of the subjects. He also believed that education should be free and compulsory for all children. To accomplish this vision, he started schools in Nairobi, helped to establish schools in many towns in Kenya, volunteered his services as a teacher whenever possible, actively participated in educational committees and fought the colonial government to get parity in funds with Europeans.

When Travadi realized that there were no schools for girls in the 1920s, hence no school for my oldest sister, Triveniben, he started the first Government Indian Girls' School in Nairobi in the late 1920s. My mother, Dhankunverben, fully supported my father and the two of them used to go from home to home encouraging parents to send their little daughters to school - no mean task in those pioneer days when wild animals roamed freely everywhere! My father juggled jobs and even volunteered his services as a



Image 2: KD Travadi honoured at the opening of a school (1950s)

teacher for several months until the government deemed the numbers were sufficient to merit hiring a teacher. Once again he successfully kept it open during the 1930s when the student population declined, and the government threatened to close it down. This school led to the establishment of the biggest Indian girls' school, The Duchess of Gloucester School, which was the culmination of his work. My sisters and I attended this school, now renamed The Pangani Girls School.

Moreover, in the early 1930s, KDT was instrumental in the establishment of various schools in Nairobi: Shree Cutchi Gujarati Hindu Union, Adarsh Vidyalay School for boys, and the Government Boys' Primary School.

He fought vehemently but unsuccessfully against the government's Superannuation Scheme (1938-39) which suddenly changed the medium of instruction from vernaculars to English, thereby forcing STD/Grade Seven failures to drop out of school. This direct assault on Asian children's education encouraged my father to establish many private schools and libraries in Nairobi, Nakuru, Eldoret, Limuru and other smaller towns.

He also established and supported an educational institute (Bhuvan/hostel) called the Gujarati Halari Samyavay Chaturvediy Mandal in Rajkot, Gujarat, India. This institution was later supported by donations from my brother and sister-in-law, Ravind and Sudha Trivedi. In addition to this, Travadi also sponsored a medical scholarship to the school.

On his retirement as the President of the Seventh All India Conference on 29 April 1956, in India, KDT was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation (Manpatra) at the 8th All India Modh Brahmin's Conference for his invaluable contribution to the "betterment of the whole community and especially for education".

As the President of the Cutchi Gujarati Kanya-Shala (school) and the Secretary of Indian Educational Council, Travadi was instrumental in arranging the very first Indian Education Conference in 1943. Later, together with Dr RK Yagnik from Rajkot, India, and other prominent Indians, he helped to raise funds for a post high school college, with

a view of offering arts and science courses. Combined private and government money led to the establishment of Royal Technical College (RTC) which eventually became the University of Nairobi in the 1950s.

In keeping with his political views, Travadi started a multi-racial nursery school in the Kenya Brahma Samaj building in 1958. Once again, in the May 1960 LEGCO debate on the Committee of Supply and Budget, he reiterated that the Asian Members had unanimously sided with the Africans to oppose 'mono-racial schools', declaring 'we are ready, provided accommodation and sufficient staff is available, to throw open our schools to Africans and anybody wishing to come in.' He also suggested that 'with the changing of the times', Swahili should be introduced into Asian schools.

In his capacity as a member - and later Chairman - of both the Indian Educational Council and the Education Advisory Board for many years, Travadi fought hard to bring equity to education subsidies for European and non-European schools. During the same 1960 debate, he noted the following: As late as 1960, the Minister of Finance boasted that he expected a surplus of £ 430,000.00 but instead of using this money allocated for Asian schools, the government increased tuition fees to pay for the development of six Asian secondary schools! KDT pointed out that most schools needed repair, renovation and trained staff, especially in the villages, and that without proper facilities, 3400 Asian children were going without education. Seething with frustration and anger, he summed up the situation thus: 'The money is there. The money was there. But there is somebody sitting on that money like a snake, a cobra, who does not part with the money at all.'

His obituary in the East African Standard of 3 October 1961, states:

'Mr Travadi never lost his early interest in Asian education in Kenya, campaigning vigorously throughout the years for improvements. He had constantly called for free and compulsory education for all children in Kenya'.

Social Reformer

KD Travadi advocated many social reforms for those who were suppressed or oppressed: mainly girls, women and lower caste Hindus, fully supporting women's organizations such as the Shree Satsung Mandal and Bhagini Samaj by giving them free legal services and saving them thousands of shillings. As recorded in the Kenya Brahma Sabha Commemorative Souvenir issue of April 1979, (KBSCS) it was during his presidency that women were allowed to become life members. Consequently in 1954, sixty-five women, including my mother, were enrolled as life members with equal rights to men.

My parents opposed child brides and the crippling dowry system. Unlike most people of their time, they believed that besides divorce on grounds of desertion and cruelty, divorce by mutual consent should also be permitted. Travadi advocated this during the LEGCO debate of March 1960 on Hindu Marriage and Divorce. Replying on behalf of the government, Mr Madan, Minister without Portfolio, said: 'the very idea of divorce itself is unknown to the social life of Hindu people', implying in effect that that would be a step too far. Moreover, my parents believed there should be no stigma against divorcees and widows, and that they should be allowed to remarry, just as their male counterparts were.



Image 3: KD Travadi, President of Kenya Brahma Sabha (1953-54)

Kenya Asian Civil Service 1924 - 1946

KD Travadi devoted 27 years of uninterrupted service to (latterly as President of) The Kenya Asian Civil Service Association (KACSA) and concentrated his efforts on improving their conditions and salaries. Therefore, he joined many Boards: the Asian Civil Service Advisory Board, the Asian Officers' Family Pension Board and the Asiatic Widows and Orphans Board, to improve benefits for civil servants and their families.

KDT advocated one umbrella association for European and non-European civil servants, to ensure equal rights based on merit rather than race, to eradicate the horrendous disparity in wages and working conditions.

Generally known as the "Father of the Association", KDT and his tremendous hard work was best summed up during the 'Farewell Address, a casket and a purse' presented to him by the KACSA members and recorded in The Colonial Times of 28 December 1946, just before his departure for England to study Law at Lincoln's Inn.

The Vice President, Mr NR Desai said:

'Mr Travadi's connection with the Association is a long one... It led him into the arena many a time with the authorities and although he did not very well succeed in getting the bull by the horn, his dauntless spirit and will to win have encouraged the members of the service, labouring under adverse conditions, to keep their spirits and hopes high. This has earned him the admiration of the Service and brought into the folds of the parent body practically all members of the Asian Civil Service. Mr Travadi knows no defeat and his decision at the age of fifty to undertake a course of legal studies in England is in itself a proof of his perseverance actuated by a desire of improving his status in life.



Image 4: First Conference of KACSA (30.12.45) Held under the Chairmanship of President KD Travadi at the Patel Brotherhood, Nairobi. Delegates from Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru, Eldoret, Nyeri and Kiambu attended.

Travadi thanked all the speakers: Messrs. NR Desai, Da Cruz, KR Patel, TA Nayar, Simmonds, Nelson, GS Amar (President of Kisumu branch) Mohamed Sadiq and AB Patel for their compliments and gifts at the Farewell Party (Dec. 1946). He explained that he had fought with the government because 'despite a quarter of a century's battles, Asian civil servants' salaries had remained meagre.' He said that although they now have the Asian Civil Service Advisory Board, 'this was not the journey's end for them.' He urged them to continue this battle for justice and equality.

Community Projects

Besides the KACSA, KD Travadi worked for many other institutions. Under his guidance and leadership, many projects were established including:

1. Desai Memorial Hall. With Dr ACL De Souza and Dr KV Adalja, he raised funds from the entire East African community to honour the late, great Mr MA Desai.
2. Congress Foundation Fund. KDT helped collect one lakh shillings for the Indian Congress of East Africa.
3. Housing. The Asian Civil Service building on Juja Road, and two and three room houses for Government workers, were mainly the result of KDT's hard work.
4. Sports. KDT served as President of the Asian Sports Association, under whose banner annual competitions were arranged between Europeans and Asians. He



Image 5: Kenya Asian Civil Servants.Demonstration to Mr K. D. Travadi(President K.A.C.S. Association. 14 December 1946)

also awarded a silver Trivedi Cricket Cup (currently with Indra Trivedi, an avid cricketer) to encourage sports and foster better relations between races.

5. Social Equality. KDT started a movement to open Hindu temples for harijans in the early 1930s, and the Indian Government fully recognized and rewarded his efforts.
6. Kenya Brahma Sabha. One of the founding members, KDT was able to acquire land from the Government and establish this Association in 1931.
7. The Sarojini Naidu Library. Mrs Travadi was the driving force in establishing this library in the Desai Memorial Hall Building.
8. Education. In addition to all the schools KDT established in Kenya and India, he opened the first multi-racial Nursery School in the Kenya Brahm Sabha's building in 1958.

Legal and Political Involvement

K D Travadi had a life-long involvement with political leaders in his struggle to gain social, economic, educational and political parity between whites and non-whites. Besides the local politicians he had met, he made friends with and worked with many international leaders, especially from India: VK Krishna Menon, independent India's first High Commissioner to the UK, whom he met in England, and India's Commissioner to East Africa Apa Pant and his wife Nalini Pant in Kenya. Also, as a leading organizer for Indian Vice President Dr Radhakrishnan's visit to Kenya in 1956, KDT developed a lasting relationship with this world famous philosopher and politician. As a LEGCO member, he went to India as an informal representative of Kenyan Indians, and met the Governor of Gujarat in Ahmadabad, and Dr Radhakrishnan in New Delhi.

Dr Radhakrishnan's answer was as expected; India had too many of its own problems and too many people to help K. Indians. The latter should consider themselves Africans and help in gaining Uhuru.



Image 6: Rashtrapati Bhavan, New Delhi, India when my parents and two sisters had gone there to meet Dr Radhakrishnan. KDT had gone there as an unofficial LEGCO member to find out what the Indian policy would be re Indians in Kenya in an independent Kenya.

After his return from England as a barrister in 1950, KDT joined our uncle's legal firm, renamed 'Trivedi and Travadi Advocates' where he pursued his objectives with a passion.

An outspoken and fearless revolutionary, he urged Asians and Africans to combine their forces and start a non-violent but a strong and well organized, political, protest movement (1952 Manifesto) to oust the oppressive colonial government based on the 'colour bar' and racial segregation in land policy, education and health services. He advocated a multiracial, democratic, independent Kenya with equal representation for all, irrespective of race, religion, creed, caste or gender. He once again clarified his position, especially to the indigenous Africans, that he was not seeking any privileges for Asians.

Travadi supported the Kenya African National Union, and there were several meetings held at our home on Blenheim Road in Nairobi. Many Africans including Tom Mboya (future Minister of Economics) and Odinga Oginga (future first Vice President with Jomo Kenyatta as President) came to our home in the dead of night for political meetings. As many as 15-20 people would enjoy my mother's cooking, and discuss strategies to achieve self rule, gain back the confiscated White Highlands and obtain the release of Jomo Kenyatta and other freedom fighters. Why should the Africans who had supported and shed their own blood for the British during World War II be treated like third class citizens in their own country? Why should they be deprived of their own best lands, the White Highlands? When would they be ever given effective political representation in their own homeland? KDT supported their fight but not their use of violence.

In his LEGCO debate on 5 May 1960, KDT reminded the House of the deputation that he and other Asian colleagues had sent to the then Governor for the release of Jomo Kenyatta. Also, he reminded them that while in England, in February 1960, the Asian Group Members had approached the Secretary of State and made a similar request for the freedom of Jomo Kenyatta and Makhan Singh. He said that the latter, though a staunch trade unionist with communist leanings, was no longer a 'danger to the country'.



Image 7: K D Travadi Bar-at-Law

Willis Maganda in his book *Trajectories of Indians' Political Alienation*, quotes my father speaking in Parliament in 1959: 'From prisons to Prime Ministership is the order of the day in every emergent country, and I do not see any reason why history should not repeat itself here in Kenya in an era of "winds of change." KDT emphasized that 'The Asian community has unequivocally asked for Jomo Kenyatta's release and I join the chorus.'

So in keeping with his principles, in the 1950s Githungiri trials, my father was one of the pro bono lawyers who defended some of the Kikuyus accused of Mau Mau activities during the Lari Massacre. Fondly called the 'elder statesman' by younger lawyers and activists such as Pio Gama Pinto, Fitz De Souza and Achroo Kapila, KDT continued to support them behind the scenes as recorded in Chapter 9 of *East African Footprints* by Bhanuben Kotecha and in the article *Kabaka's appointment of Asians laudable* by Dr. Danson Kahyana. Also, Dr. Sana Aiyar in her book *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora* states on page 214 that Travadi and other lawyers were 'busy with their Mau Mau cases, trying to keep a low profile in order to avoid Pinto's fate' for Pinto had been detained and Jaswant Singh who was in India was 'about to be declared a prohibited immigrant'.

Travadi also recognized the absolute necessity of separating the judiciary from the Executive to put an end to the malpractices suffered by non-Europeans. So, on 15 November 1960, he supported Mr Odinga's Motion during LEGCO's Session on Justice in African Courts, for this separation was a fundamental principle of British justice and considering that 'Kenya is now on the threshold of achieving self-rule... this unholy alliance should cease...'

Fully aware of the false charges, atrocities and genocide committed by the colonial

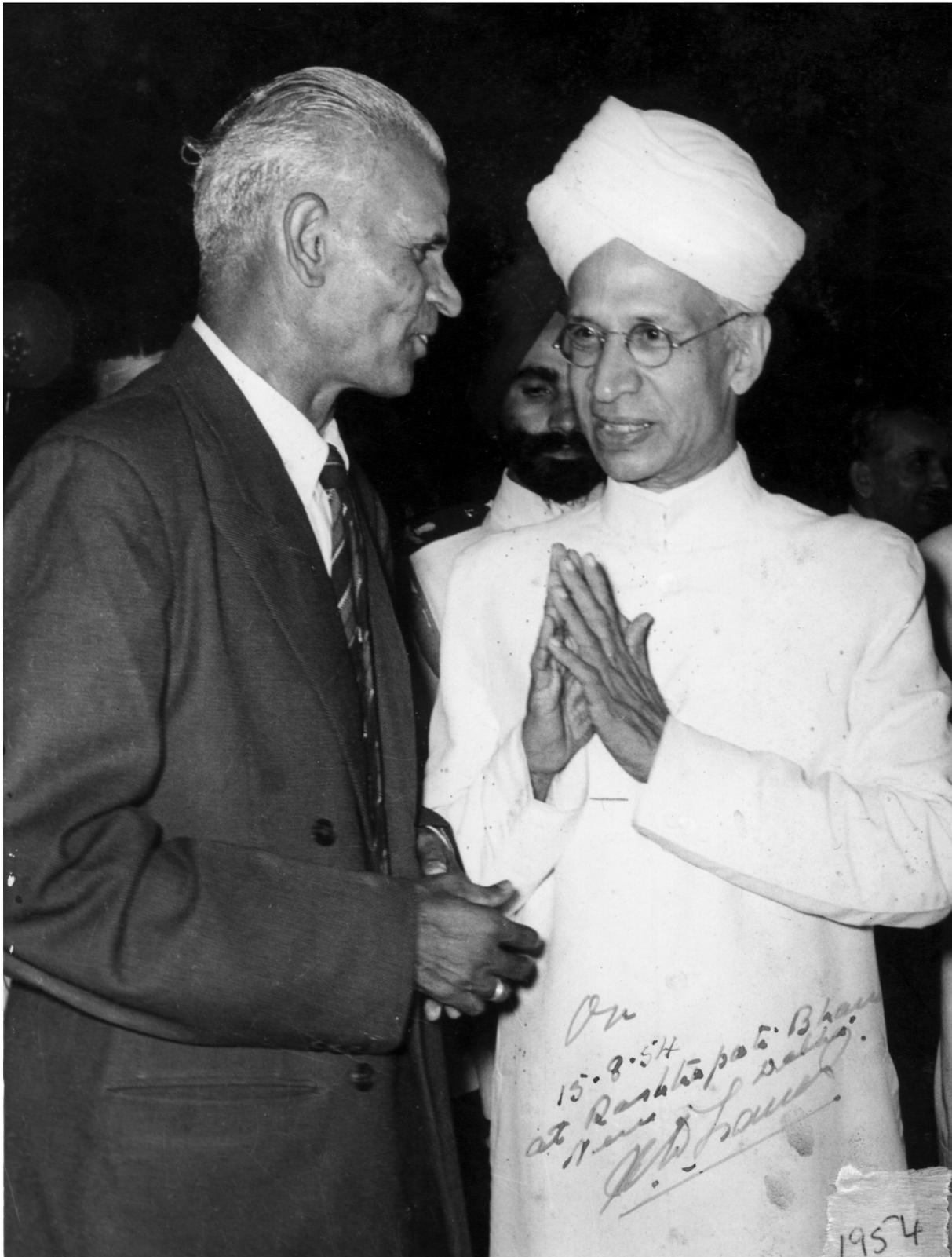


Image 8: Dr Radhakrishnan (First Vice President of India) & Travadi in India (1954)

government against Kikuyus and having personally lost three Kikuyu office assistants who simply disappeared, Travadi questioned the Chief Secretary regarding the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights during the 18 February 1959 to 2 April 1959



Image 9: Apa Pant (First Indian High Commissioner) & Mr. & Mrs. Travadi in Nairobi, Kenya (1950s)

LEGCO sessions. He asked if the Kenyan government would make representations to the UK Government and apply this Declaration of December 10, 1948, to the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya.

In a shocking reply, the Chief Secretary said that this Declaration was ‘not a legally binding document...’ In the name of ending the Mau Mau Emergency, the colonial government had not applied this Declaration, had bent its rules and principles, and detained without trial, tortured and murdered thousands of Kikuyus. In essence, it had made a mockery of Article 29 of the Declaration by not showing any ‘respect for the rights and requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in the democratic society’.

Besides the question on human rights, Travadi asked the Chief Secretary if the government of Kenya was aware of the ‘Resolution on racial discrimination in non-self governing territories adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations at its 402nd plenary meeting on 10 December 1952’. Once again, the reply was negative. He was told that ‘the government devotes constant attention to the problem of racial discrimination and sees no reason to institute any further special enquiry on the subject’. How hypocritical!

Travadi had earlier exposed the hypocrisy of this government in his response to the

speech from the Chair on 5 November 1958. His excellency had stated that the constitution was flexible but needed no changes. In other words, KDT clarified that it 'would carry on without the presence or the cooperation of those who were dissatisfied with it.'

Furthermore, His Excellency had said that the Kenyan government must be in the hands of 'responsible Kenyans.' KDT asked where these Kenyans were and why there was no mention of any 'Kenya citizenship legislation' or any 'suggestion whatsoever of creating Kenya citizens' in his speech or in the Sessional Paper. Travadi vented his frustrations and disappointment by saying:

'Everybody still preaches multi-racialism and Kenya citizenship, but I will repeat that there is nothing in these two papers to suggest that... I want to become a Kenyan de facto and de jure. I want everyone here and everyone outside to be on equal terms. I am in search of equality, but I am sorry to say that after 41 years of living in Kenya, and seeing my children and my children's children born in this part of Africa, I have not been able to attain that status.'



Image 10: A - K D Travadi at The Lancaster House Conference (Feb-1960)

Travadi further stated that if he could change his brown skin to white or black, he still 'would not be allowed to occupy or to hold a single piece of land in the Highlands or in the reserves'. So he declared: 'I stand here as a British subject, and demand equality from every corner, not only in the administrative side of the Civil Service, but everywhere right down to local government.'

Continuing his attack on racial discrimination, he further clarified his views by saying:

'I am not after African lands, nor do I want to swamp the Highlands. What I am pleading is for a little bit of free trading so my community can stand on its legs. Formerly

the Government was more or less for European development, and now, as I have said before, it goes for European and African development. Now is there anything for Asian development?’

KDT emphasized the major role that they had played:

‘The Asians have been here for centuries and are going to remain here forever. They have been instrumental in opening the doors of Kenya by their adventurous spirit, sacrifice and hard work, but it is because they are so thrifty, industrious, more attentive to business than any other race, and hence their position is intolerable.’ Despite their loyalty and devotion to this country, their allegiance to the Queen, and their participation and sacrifice in the two World Wars, they have hardly any representation in the government. In 1923, they had five seats and in 1952, they got one more!! Travadi repeated:

‘I demand as a matter of right and privilege equality both in the Kenya Legislature and in the Council of Ministers. . . in its administrative machinery and educative bodies and in local government and other boards.’ He did not seek ‘any privileged position over any body or any race.’ He ‘simply claimed equality.’

KDT further exposed the hypocrisy and double standards of the Europeans who were limiting Asian immigration while continuing easy and open white immigration. The government was deporting Indians using false accusations, fake and exaggerated numbers and implying/declaring that they were criminals. Numbers of those bringing back spouses from India and Pakistan were particularly inflated for propaganda purposes. KDT enraged white ministers by asking them what their women did once they got married to white Kenyans. ‘Did they disappear in Europe?’ He challenged Mr Griffith-Jones, the Minister for Legal Affairs, and Mr Slade, the Specially Elected Member, who said that ‘thousands and thousands of Asians have entered illegally here into this country..’ (1960 LEGCO debates on ‘Liberty of Subject’). Therefore, Travadi demanded an independent investigation committed to check each and every case of these ”thousands and thousands” of illegal immigrants.



Image 11: B - K D Travadi at The Lancaster House Conference (Feb-1960)) & Mr. & Mrs. Travadi in Nairobi, Kenya (1950s)

We should not talk of multi-racialism, non-racialism, or mono-racialism unless equality for all the races is established’ said KDT in his response to the speech from the Chair on 5 November 1958. Without equality, he believed, that there would be no peace in the

country. He stood by this principle at the 1960 Lancaster House Conference as noted by Dr. Sana Aiyar in her book, *Indians in Kenya: The Politics of Diaspora*. She wrote:

(on page 234) that when Travadi called himself “an African and particularly a Kenyan first and a Kenyan last...he hoped that nationalist assertions would trump racially defined differences between Kenya’s diasporic and indigenous citizens.” Travadi stated that since Kenya was a “plural society” its citizens should not bind themselves “to any civilization, western or eastern,” but rather “assimilate” with one another. He saw the impossibility of “common citizenship” in independent Kenya unless the constitution guaranteed the same rights to all races.’

Having struggled for equal rights throughout his life, including in the LEGCO in the late fifties and as a delegate to the 1960 Lancaster House Conference, Travadi had some advice for the newly emerging nations. In his Parliamentary speech on the Budget Debate of 5 May 1960, he described democracy as ‘a plant of slow growth’ which ‘needs patience, peace, stability and even staying power. Translated in terms of millions its essentials are food, clothing, shelter, health and individual freedom. Mere political democracy without economic independence... and equal distribution can only prove a snare and an illusion.’ He warned that ‘The evils of economic and political control by one country over another for the exploitation of its raw materials, cheap labour and markets’, was another form of colonialism where industrialized nations were benefiting by importing raw materials from the colonies and arranging prices for those products to suit them, not the colonies. He said that ‘under democracy, there should be no monopolies of any type whatsoever.’ Travadi foresaw some of the pitfalls and wanted independent Kenya to avoid them and be truly free and successful.

In Memoriam

KD Travadi died in October 1961, before Kenya’s uhuru, but he had the satisfaction of knowing that his hard fought battle against colonialism had nearly won, and he hoped that the judicial system would be kept separate and independent from politics and the President’s Office. A radical visionary who believed that everyone was created equal and that the ills of oppression - be they from racist, discriminatory colonial system, unjust Hindu caste system, or from domineering patriarchal society, - must be removed. He believed that true equality, freedom and education would free individuals from political and religious subjugation, economic dependence and poverty, and that it would help to build a healthier, happier and stable society. A Gandhian, a pacifist and a passionate social activist, my father was determined, disciplined, dedicated, and a well-rounded, self-made man. A progressive thinker, he accomplished much in education, socioeconomic and political reforms. A singular humanitarian and a fearless fighter, he sacrificed his life and health in the service of humanity.

Acknowledgement

I am greatly indebted to Ramnik Shah of London UK, Indra Trivedi of Mississauga, Ontario, Sudhaben Patel of Toronto, Ontario and my family respectively for their encouragement and help in research and writing of this article.