



How Indians rose to control Uganda's cotton trade

Getting in the trade. In December 1909, an Indian called L. R. Ramsingh applied for permission to introduce improved hand-gins in Mubende, Masaka and Masindi. What Ramsingh wanted was to set up something more improved than what the colonial government had banned.

A cotton conference held in Uganda in December 1907 came up with resolutions to improve the crop quality in the protectorate.

One of the solutions was the Cotton Ordinance of 1908. The ordinance gave the governor absolute powers to determine how the crop would be grown and marketed.

Under the ordinance, it was provided that only seeds provided by the government were to be planted, and also that all plants were to be destroyed immediately after the first harvest. Unfortunately, these rules were received with a lot of opposition from the farmers that the government to some extent had to use force to have them implemented.

But it was not until the next harvest season that the government felt the impact of the new rules. Writing in a report on the introduction of cotton industry in Uganda, Sir Hesketh Bell observed that the rules would only work in a country like Uganda simply because the weather permitted it.

"Regulations of such a drastic nature could hardly have been applied to any territory which did not enjoy the somewhat unusual conditions prevailing in Uganda. The authority exercised by the native government over the peasantry is so great the bare orders of the chiefs were expected to suffice to ensure effective obedience of the rules framed under the ordinance," Bell wrote.

"The regents and the chief of Buganda appreciate the relevancy of maintaining a high standard in the quality of cotton exported from the protectorate. They promised that all their tenants and peasants in general will destroy all the cotton plants that

were not of the 'American upland variety' and see that no seed, save for that which was given out by the government, should be planted."

Despite the praise of the population's response, there were pockets of resistance within Buganda. And in response, the chiefs who were not following the orders were threatened with dismissal.

According to file number 1635/90 in the colonial archives, a correspondence from the Provincial Commissioner to the District Commissioner of Masaka asked him not to be lenient with chiefs not supporting government programmes.

"I regret to hear that the chiefs in your district show want of interest in this most important industry. Please make the sub-chiefs responsible clearly understand that they will forfeit their position unless they show more attention to their duties and send the Mugema (the title for the chief of saza chief) to me on my return to Kampala," the file reads.

Another step taken by the government was the banning of hand ginneries and recalling of all those sold earlier. The government bought them back at the price it had sold them and went ahead to discourage anyone else from introducing cheap machinery in the ginning of cotton as it would compromise the quality.

The issue of quality had become so serious in that the ginned cotton sent to England was fetching little money.

Enter Indians

In December 1909, an Indian called L. R. Ramsingh applied for permission to introduce improved hand-gins in the areas of Mubende, Masaka and Masindi where he was promising farmers better prices than what was being paid in Kampala.

He went ahead to write to the commissioner explaining why he wanted



A woman picks cotton. A cotton conference held in Uganda in December 1907 came up with resolutions to improve the crop quality in the protectorate. FILE PHOTOS

to introduce the new machines.

"You are perhaps aware that there is a ring at present that exists at Kampala to keep the prices of un-ginned cotton low and in this end in view it is to be shortly proposed to the HE the governor that hand-gins be prohibited," his letter read in part.

Instead, government was looking for a better solution and was not encouraging the establishment of hand-operated ginneries. But what Ramsingh wanted was to set up something more improved than what the government had banned.

By 1909, there were three such ginneries in Kampala, each was costing £15 to set up. Others issues affecting cotton that kept coming back to the authorities was the buying monopoly.

By 1906, the Uganda Company was the only cotton buyer. But this was broken during the 1907 season when a number of Ugandans and Indians appeared on the scene, but acting on behalf of the British East African Corporation.

This company bought un-ginned cotton and took it to Kisumu for gin-



The Masaka Cooperative Union building. Masaka was one of the areas that opposed the Cotton Ordinance of 1908.

ning before exporting it to Britain.

But then there was a government scare that there might be insufficient demand which would discourage farmers from growing cotton.

To avert this possibility, a directive was made by the government to the agricultural officer to buy all the cot-

ton he found with the farmers.

According to the instruction archived as number SMP106/1907, "Should you see any sign of cotton not being bought you should act on HE Mr Commissioner Bell's authority to buy it from government's fund. At the present juncture we cannot allow

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BY 1913, THERE WERE 20 GINNERIES WITH THE BULK OF THEM IN BUGANDA AND BUSOGA.