



# Seeing Ourselves Through the Eyes of Others

An African Student Narrates Experiences of Racism in India

○ John Patrick Ogwando

I am a 39-year-old Kenyan national. I currently live in Mysore and came to India by chance. Originally my older brother was supposed to come to India but chose not to pursue his further education. I liked the idea of studying in India, and as I didn't get a seat at the local University I applied through the Ministry of Nairobi to Indian universities and got admission at the MakhanLal University in Udaipur. I arrived in India on the July 22, 1992 at Mumbai. I was shocked at the fast pace of the city. It left me feeling very confused so I was glad that I only spent a day there, before leaving for Udaipur.

At MakhanLal University I graduated with a Bachelors degree where I chose Sociology, English literature, and Public Administration as my courses of study. I initially wanted to pursue a degree in journalism, but at the time that course was not offered in North India so I ended up studying journalism at the Masters level.

In Kenya people believe that the best students get into the local universities. And every year, like in India, the cut off gets higher. The government run Kenyan universities are unable to accommodate the growing number of students who want admission. Those who don't get in,

*This article is based on a taperecorded interview with John Patrick Ogwando by Madhu Kishwar. The interview was transcribed and edited by Misha Rai with inputs from the author.*

have to make a choice; either go to a private university where you have to pay an exorbitant fee or go to India where you can get good education at a reasonable price.

Even though a lot of students come to India believing that they are getting good education at an affordable price, there is a paradox in the way Kenyans look at Indian degrees. Kenyans believe that the local universities or universities in the West are much better. There is mistrust

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towards the Indian education system because there have been stories in the press about students buying degrees. This gives hardworking, honest students a bad name.

Fortunately, a lot of students who have gone back home to work have proved themselves in spite of such speculations. Ironically, as mentioned before, though people in my country look down upon Indian degrees, a majority of college educated working professionals in Kenya today were educated in India. Personally I believe that when you come to India it is not just for the degree, it's important to learn about the way people here relate to life, the diversity of culture. It's a life changing experience.

## Similarities in Culture

Kenyan parents who send their children abroad for an education, although they want to provide their children with the best of education, prefer sending their children to India where the society is similar to their own. The conservative setup of India suits them because they don't have to worry about their children losing their Africanness. Also unlike in the West, where there are many employment opportunities, parents feel that after studying in India students would return home to work. African parents feel threatened by the Western culture and by the fact that most students who go there choose not to return.

There were many Kenyans studying in India and in Udaipur alone there were more than 500. My class itself was composed of many foreign students since courses like Public Administration and English Literature were not popular among the Indian students at our college. I was registered at the Vidya Bhawan Rural Institute where a lot of students from African countries like Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda were studying.

Having so many students from Africa turned out to be a good thing because I realized rather quickly that Udaipur has a very conservative society and people were not always very approachable. In any case we didn't have many opportunities to interact with the local community except when our teachers invited us or some Indian friends asked us to

join in the various festival celebrations like *Diwali* and the *Garba*. It was through these religious and other cultural get-togethers that we were able to observe and ascertain the way of life of the local people.

After my first degree I realized that in itself it would not be enough to get a job and I would have to take another degree. My parents had initially wanted me to study something professional like Law or B.Com but they let me choose the area of academic qualifications because earlier they had made a mistake by making choices for me.

### **Bureaucratic Red-Tapism**

When I first started my second degree, M.S in Communication in Bangalore, unfortunately for me at that very time the Government of India passed a law whereby one could not continue studying on the student visa while undertaking research work. You had to apply for a research visa and get approval from the Ministry of Human Resources in New Delhi. I had the choice of doing that from here or going back to my home country, with my research proposal, to apply for a visa from there.

I applied through the HRD ministry, which turned out to be a complicated process. The Ministry wanted a letter from the University I was applying to, stating that they were offering me a seat and the University wanted to see my research visa before they would register me as a student while the Bangalore police wanted a letter from the University and the HRD clearance before they could renew my residential permit.

It took a while before I got my clearance from the HRD but then my guide was unavailable. Due to the time it took me to get my certificates together for admission and the problem with my visa I lost out on three and half years.

My research deals with the treatment of development issues in news, specifically the print media and



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its correlation with NGOs' perception of development. For that I am doing comparative analysis between two newspapers in India, *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express*, and two newspapers in Kenya.

### **Unacknowledged Racism**

Through my experiences in Indian society I have realized that people here over-value fairness in skin colour. You can see that from the advertisements and television. Dark skinned people are looked down upon and being black Africans we are humiliated a lot in our daily interactions. They don't understand where we're from or what it means to be an African. From my conversations with other Africans I have learnt that when they travel to the West or go to study there they have prepared themselves to face racism. The issue of race in the West is very well publicized and acknowledged. But nobody expects that when they travel to India they will find that Indians are racist. Here, unlike in a lot of other countries, racism is more subtle. You

tend to realize that only after you have experienced it and even then not everyone will classify what happens as racism.

Some people think it's merely curiosity; they interpret the questions they are asked as a result of lack of experience with Africans. Another theory is that people here don't know that using certain terms is not politically correct. For example here they often use the term 'Negro' without realizing that it is a derogatory word for us. Personally I don't buy the theory simply because as a people Indians are very aware of world politics and developments. Therefore, it seems strange that they wouldn't know this.

I could probably make allowances (or give them benefit of the doubt) and believe that not all people know that 'Nigger' or 'Negro' is a disparaging term but we are also referred to as monkeys! They call us 'Kalia' to our face. The other term they use is 'Khoti,' which essentially means monkey in the South Indian languages. Should we then return the favour by calling Indians brown monkeys?

Then there is the constant staring. And the fact that people seem to have a different attitude towards us, always laughing at us in the buses. They will pass comments among themselves and laugh. This is the primary reason why African students choose not to learn Indian languages, no matter how long they've been here. They are

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apprehensive about understanding what is said about them which might lead them to react more aggressively. Already they get provoked by the term 'Negro.'

### **Hard-to-Ignore Insults**

A lot of people advise us to ignore these things but it is hard when everyday people say something to you or children follow you around calling you names. Then there are the parents who point us out to their children as if there's something wrong with us. Another thing that is really bothersome is the stereotypical questions asked about HIV AIDS, the implication being that Africans have loose morals. We are often asked questions like: 'Is sex free in Africa? Can one have sex with anyone in Africa?'

People don't realize that many countries in Africa have a similar value system as prevailing in India. The obsession with virginity in India is the same as we have back home. Parents believe that it is important for having a good steady relationship. We are surprised when people assume that we come from a less conservative, promiscuous society.

### **Ignorance about Africa**

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Indians expect you to understand their own cultural differences and make allowances for them, but don't seem to be as

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tolerant of us. For example eating with one's left hand is considered unclean in south India due to their toilet practices. Since we Africans don't have the same practices we are constantly being scolded by Indians without them inquiring why we do that.

The traditional African clothes we wear are seen as nighties and people tend to laugh at us. But despite this some Africans continue to wear traditional clothes while others might take to wearing Western clothes like people in India. Another interesting stereotype in India is to think of all Africans as part of the group of drug

dealers from Africa. That's the image a lot of Indians believe in.

Indians also seem to think all of Africa is the same, that, for example, there's no difference between a Ugandan and West African. We have also been mistaken for Sri Lankans, which is shocking considering the long and close history India shares with the Sri Lankans. There are people who still think Mandela is the President of all of Africa.

### **The Cricket Connection**

Indians tend to relate a lot more to South Africa. They are star struck by South Africans and put them in the higher echelons of African society. This might be because of cricket, which is also the reason why they are getting to know about Kenya in recent years. We beat the West Indies in 1996. When Ghana played well everyone knew about them and wanted to be associated with them. But most people don't know that there were five African teams in the World Cup. Nobody knows about the Ivory Coast, or Togo. All they know is Ghana because Ghana performed better than any other African team, so whenever they see any black person, they ask, "Are you from Ghana? You play cricket very well."

### **Women Get it Worse**

African women have been subjected to a lot more ridicule than their male counterparts. I remember people would laugh every time my friend stepped out of her house. Most of the times she didn't know what the problem was until a neighbour asked her, "How is that you entertain different men every day?" She was shocked because we were just friends

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who were visiting. The impression the neighbourhood had was that she was of loose character. In our culture, even though we are conservative, we don't frown upon men and women mingling with each other or considering members of the opposite sex as their best friends. But here people read too much into it without making allowances for our customs. We are more open and outgoing. But here the prejudice also applies to Indian women, who are considered loose if they go out with men, Indian or African.

Many African women have bigger breasts and bigger backsides than Indian women. If you question a lot of Indians in depth you find out they believe that African women have these kinds of figures because of their sexual habits. Their ignorance is shocking.

Africans face ridicule if they date Indians or if Indians date Africans. People laugh at you. People will pass comments. They will call the guys

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names in the local language which imply they are immoral, "What is it that you see in this black thing?" is one of the questions they might ask.

Indian girls are often very comfortable interacting with Africans on campus but due to the intolerance they face outside they won't even acknowledge us there. There have been cases where Indian men date African women, but as usual, men get away with anything in any society, so it's not such a big issue. But

marriage is still a big NO. Of course there are isolated cases of a few Africans getting married to Indians.

### **Big Cities are No Different**

In small cities people don't get the same opportunities to interact with you. It was that way in Udaipur. The locals might have wanted to interact with us but there was a language barrier. So when you come to a city like Bangalore you believe that since it is a cosmopolitan city you can interact more openly with people. But even here you realize that one will face other forms of racism. It could be calling you names, or looking down at you, or not attending to you at a restaurant. We are given very little attention when we walk into a shop. People look at you as if they are measuring your worth. Makes you wonder whether they are deciding if we will be able to afford something or not or whether they want to sell us what we are looking for!

Some colleges don't admit Africans. There are no clear-cut policies to stop admitting them but some just don't admit them, because they're considered to have loose morals. They act as though Africans will have a bad influence on the rest of the students. But then they have no problem admitting students from other races.

The end result is that some of the African students end up registering in mediocre colleges while some others prefer to register in colleges where attendance is not that big a deal. So they spend most of the time in their homes. They study from home and don't go out to socialize so that they don't have to face obstacles and insults every day. There are so many students who don't go out at all. They ask, 'what is there to see? In our own countries we would go out but we don't do so here because we want to avoid problems in the streets, to avoid problems in the bus.'

There are also those who just don't use buses, though that is the

normal mode of transport that you expect any student to use.

What is most surprising is that there we also face hostility from Indians who are black-skinned. People look, people stare, and what is surprising is that it happens despite the fact that African students have been coming to India for decades. It is not as if we are new arrivals!

And then there is the problem of high fees charged in some colleges, which has also prompted some African students to explore remotely located institutions. For example to take up a pharmacy course, most African students go down in Tamil Nadu to Irrur because it is cheaper there. Other foreign nationals, like people from the Middle East, might comfortably pay it but African students find it very difficult to pay such high fees, especially for professional courses. The end result is that we end up going to small places.

### **Rural India More Liberal**

Because of my Masters dissertation I got a chance to travel in the rural areas to understand the reach of mass media. And the kind of interaction I experienced really made me feel good about being there. The only problem was the language barrier.

Unlike in the cities, when we go to the rural areas, we witness much more warmth. Villagers are curious about us because we are black. But India's villages are very different from the cities. Despite problems of communication, they are more

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receptive and more humble; you can see it clearly in their faces. It seems to me that the people in villages have a more open mind; they look at Africans more with curiosity than anything else. And even with their curiosity, which can be intrusive, they're more welcoming and hospitable.

### **Positive Experiences in India**

However, I don't think that everyone is prejudiced towards us and all Indians treats us badly. Among the people I spoke to for my research, I came across the case of an African student in India who got sick having being diagnosed with Sickle Cell Aneamia. She was admitted to four hospitals for treatment. In the end her kidneys failed and it became necessary to take her back home. Since her parents had already spent so much money on her treatment, we had to rely on the kindness of the Indian community. People came forward and donated money for the purchase of her tickets to go home.

However, when she reached the airport, the Jet Airways rejected her because they believed she would scare the passengers; they didn't even want to hear the explanations about her illness. She had become very thin due to hospitalization. The crew thought it was due to HIV/AIDS, and they refused to let her board the flight. They claimed that she might die on their flight. This is despite the fact that our embassy had taken the responsibility and the doctor said she was fit enough to travel.

It was only after lengthy explanations that they transferred her to the next flight, which left the next day. She had to be readmitted to the hospital in the interim.

And of course many times Indian students have helped other African students in need of financial aid since many of them come from families that are not so financially sound. We also get help through various International organizations like the International Victory Fellowship. Students also rely



**John with a woman friend**

on their various activity groups, like the prayer group. Unfortunately people consider such prayer group meetings noisy because when we pray, we sing and clap our hands. We have had to move our meetings to six different locations in Bangalore due to objections over our mode of prayer.

### **Simmering Resentments**

African students are bound to feel some modicum, if not a lot, of resentment. But I think it is well hidden because most of them would just like to bury such experiences and forget about them. Also they resort to just staying with their own kind, creating ghettos. Many don't want to talk about it. A lot of Kenyans and Africans, when they leave, choose to cut off all ties with people they met here. They put it all behind them because they feel they met with hostility towards them for staying in India for so long from the locals.

Those who have stayed here a long time and opened up to the Indian society have both good and bad memories. We try to keep the bad memories at bay. In my opinion we are not just here to finish studying and go home. We are also here to build bridges. I've had the advantage of being here longer than most people so I have observed the good and the bad and learnt how to interact with the local community.

I met an Indian at a workshop recently who told me about his experience in Eritrea. He met a student who had studied in India and was very bitter about his experiences in India. The problem is people are still carrying that anger because while they were in India they didn't have anyone to talk to about it. They don't have proper support systems to deal with what happens.

In my case, I managed to deal with all this because I was very outgoing and talked to a lot of people and worked with an NGO called Seva Mandir while I was in Udaipur. They help expose college students to social issues. Through my work with them I was able to relate to people, understand the society and see what kind of development work was ongoing. I think we need to have an outgoing attitude because society and people welcome such kind of interventions. The team at Seva Mandir understood that the problem of racism has to be dealt with. It helped me to adjust to the local society. One of the things Anita, the then Director of Seva Mandir told me still stands out in my mind. She said, "See Patrick, when you complain of racism in the Indian society, remember you are just here for a short time. There are Indians who face racism in

their own country. So look at it from that aspect and move on.”

### **Positive Interactions**

There have been many students who were able to take back positive impressions through their interactions with Indian families. Today such interactions have increased with families opening their doors to us during festivals or inviting us for organized programmes. In Bangalore especially, since it has an organization called, International Students’ Hospitality, which was started by a businessman, Mr. Ravi Shankar. Based on his experiences in America, Shankar thought that he has an obligation to the foreign students. He also wanted to change the attitude of foreign students because he realized that most foreign students were leaving with negative images when it would have taken just a few people to make their stay more pleasant and change their perceptions. His initiative has been working slowly but steadily. In addition, there is the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in Bangalore who have been very active helping the foreign students. Mr Lobo of ICCR has been very helpful, setting up what is called a system whereby students go to talk about various issues.

### **Resistance to Language**

Like other nationals, Indians feel great when foreigners pick up their language and traditions. I find my interactions with people more pleasant when I make the effort to use some native words while traveling in an autorickshaw or buying vegetables and other groceries. I think when we foreigners try as well, life can be much easier, and we might earn their respect.



Unfortunately understanding the language is in itself a double-edged sword because then we are able to comprehend some of what is being said to about us. This can often lead us into unwanted confrontations.

### **My Happy Experiences**

The Indian society is amazing; it is a complex society. And despite being here for several years I can’t say that I know India. Everyday you wake up to a new experience in this country. Everyday something new happens, you pick up and learn something new in the society. That is what makes it a unique country. There are people who go out of their way to help you out in times of difficulty.

Personally I’ve been the recipient of a lot of help from the Indian community. For example, my passage back home after my Masters, was sponsored by an Indian family in Bangalore. I was closely associated with them, and I was just about to embark on my research and the family was quite keen to help me go out, give me a break.

When I lost my sister in 2002, again Indian families that I’ve been close to, like Mr. Ravi Shanker’s in Bangalore, helped me to get my round trip ticket, and I managed to attend my sister’s funeral, which would not have been possible otherwise. There are many acts of

kindness that people in India do for you, people you meet on the street, people you hardly know, and that makes the society very hospitable.

But due to the diverse range of experiences one faces I keep saying that I don’t know how to relate my positive to my negative experiences. For every negative experience I go through, I go through another two or three wonderful experiences.

### **Plus Points of India**

The things that really stand out about India are hospitality, the easy pace of life, the attitude of the people and the way they work hard towards fulfilling their commitments. Many people back home are concerned mostly about political issues, but if you look at the society here they’re all concerned about economic empowerment. That’s one quality that should be emulated. Then there is the vibrant academic environment which is not just bookish but involves society as a whole. The other thing I find impressive is how Indians overcome their problems. There are a lot of problems in this society, but the way they go about working through them is commendable.

Another thing that is striking about this country is that strangers want to talk to you about everything. You meet somebody today in the vehicle and after “Hi, where are you from,” immediately the person is asked, “How old are you, what are you doing, what are your parents, and so on and on...” It is amazing how Indians openly talk to strangers about things that otherwise people will feel very shy to raise with unknown people or even with good acquaintances. □

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