INDIA DAYS EDUCATION

Safe in Chennai

Geetha Ganga

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For the African students of Loyola College, save for the language barrier, there aren't any major hurdles

"I know enough Tamil to survive in Chennai," says the street-smart Kenyan Otienu Hallan, a postgraduate student who looked greatly relieved on coming out of the examination hall after his last paper in lab technology. "My grandfather always urged me to learn the native equivalent of 'water' during one's sojourn abroad," as this, he believed, was essential for the challenges of everyday life. Recently, being homesick for *ugali*, a popular African dish made of maize flour, he finally managed to cook it, but to his surprise, it didn't taste that good — he had become so accustomed to Indian/Tamil cuisine over a period of time.

Benedict Omondi, belonging to the Luo ethnic community of Kenya, paid his greetings, in reasonably good Tamil: "*Vanakkam! Eppadi irukkinga*?" Besides Tamil, his recent acquisition, he can speak Swahili, Shona, English, French and Arabic. A master's student of visual communication, Benedicto was keen on seeing different lands and cultures, especially India. "There is a huge Indian community where I grew up in Kenya and I made up my mind to study in India despite discouraging remarks."

The Indian presence in Africa is just one narrative. The ancient and prehistoric India-Africa ties and contacts have been documented widely. Perhaps, that is what startled postgraduate students Ubah Mohammed and Najma Ali from Mogadishu,

Somalia, when they found striking similarities between the Somali *sabayad* and the *chappati*, the *sambus* and the *samosa*, *anjero* and the *dosa*.

English or Tamil?

For Gerard from Rwanda, the language barrier was the biggest hurdle at the entry level. "I knew only my native language, Kinyarwanda, and a smattering of French-accented English which no one understood." This is a real challenge for the students who are from the Francophone or Arabic-speaking regions of Africa. The students laughed aloud while recollecting an extremely funny situation when a south Sudanese student in class was unable to differentiate between English or Tamil. "Classroom learning can turn into a bizarre experience and even quite frustrating when classes are conducted mostly in Tamil, as we are under the impression that India is an officially English-speaking country and come here thinking we can improve our English language skills," says Gerard.

Gerard, Hallan and almost every other African student voiced their disappointment regarding the overall ignorance of the Indian populace about their continent's rich cultural and geographical variations. Their Indian classmates, Blessy, Nachiar and Gladys frankly admitted to knowing nothing about Africa and could not recollect anything from their history books. Like everyone else, they reduced Africa to one geographical mass and resorted to stereotypical images widely prevalent in the Indian popular imagination and culture. "For us, Africa is a land of starvation and poverty," they say.

Racism and a xenophobic attitude towards African nationals have become the norm in many Indian cities. The sporadic violence meted towards them has disturbed the students in Chennai. "We feel safe in Chennai and except for some annoying stares, haven't faced discrimination," they articulate. "However, our parents get anxious about our safety during such infamous incidents and call us regularly." Despite the pitfalls and limitations, as far as Indian education and culture are concerned, the African students' efforts to adapt and integrate into the local environment are truly praiseworthy.

The author is researcher, Somali studies and Associate Professor of English, D.G. Vaishnav College.

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