

Africa has long held a fascination for me. It started before the onset of adulthood, when we start to view the world differently (i.e., in terms of poverty, violence, crime etc). Then, we often learn to fear what is different. To a child's mind, the very distance, and the images of isolated wilderness and exotic animals -- so different from our own populous region -- added to the idea of Africa as an exciting and faraway place. And embarrassed though I am to admit it, no doubt a regular diet of Tarzan films on Sunday afternoon BTV also played their part in contributing to this perception!

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That fascination has rarely been translated into action, though. With the exception of a work-trip to Uganda some years ago, my only experience of Africa (and that too, of Arab Africa) has been a truly wonderful visit to Egypt a few years ago. So, when the opportunity recently came, to visit friends in Malawi, in Southern Africa, it seemed foolish to turn it down. I did not know much about Malawi, although I had heard about the famous Lake Malawi (the third largest lake in Africa, covering around a fifth of the country's land area). But my friends assured me it was a beautiful place, and that the people were friendly, which seemed a good start!

I must admit to having had some concerns about the general attitude Malawians might have towards Indians (and therefore, by implication, towards me). In much of Africa, Indians (a generic term used to describe anyone from the Indian subcontinent) play an important role in trade and commerce. Sometimes their relative prosperity, along with their (commonly-held) racial attitudes, that view black Africans as inferior (perhaps reflecting our internalisation of colonial attitudes), make Indians unpopular.

In this regard, I once had an encounter at Nairobi airport that was rather instructive. Although I was actually in transit to Uganda, and travelling with a Ghanaian friend, one of the airport officials in Nairobi went out of his way to give me a hard time, aggressively questioning me about my plans and demanding proof to support my claims of work-related travel. I was taken aback by his unpleasantness, although I knew already that Indians were particularly resented in Kenya (for the reasons mentioned earlier). That I had not misinterpreted the encounter in any way was made obvious when my Ghanaian friend unhappily apologised to me afterwards. "I am so ashamed that he behaved that way with you," she said, "I guess racism is everywhere, huh?" Although this did not put me off travel in Africa, it did mean



that I was watching out for such sensitivities in Malawi.

During a stay at one of the lodges on the shores of Lake Malawi, I was to be reassured in this regard. The manager there asked where I was from, and upon hearing, said I was the first Bangladeshi he had ever met. When one of my friends commented that I looked like an Indian, he looked at me carefully, before responding slowly, that yes, I did. But he also added that I looked different somehow. Pressed on the latter point, he smiled to himself, as if with some secret meaning, and said, "You can tell an Indian immediately. You don't look quite like them..." (adding, laughingly) "They are good business people, you know. They can sell you an empty bottle of water and make you think it is something special!" So -- I thought to myself -- at least I don't look like an exploitative or "chatur" (chapabaj) South Asian... And while my Kenyan experience ensured that I also kept an eye out for any strange reactions to me on the streets during my stay in Malawi, I saw none, beyond a general interest. Or an occasional desire to sell me something. And that was no greater or less than the interest shown in my European friends. In fact, I have to say that Malawi is one of the few places where I did not see Asians being treated