



Exodus: The Uganda Asians Crisis of 1972

The remarkable story of the expulsion of the Asian community from Uganda and how, despite the initial struggle for acceptance, they built successful lives in Britain

August 12th – November 1st 2022



Arundells, 59 Cathedral Close,
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With the kind support of
The Rumi Foundation and
The Ahluwalia Family Foundation

The Uganda Asians Crisis 50 Years On: From Conversation to Success

A Panel Discussion at Arundells
Thursday 1 September 2022

Preface

2022 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the expulsion of the Asian population of Uganda by President Idi Amin. The Asians were given ninety days to leave the country, often with little more than the clothes they wore. The majority were British passport holders, albeit some without automatic rights of residence in the UK. Against a background of considerable political hostility the then British Government, led by Prime Minister Edward Heath, took the decision to admit some 30,000 of those expelled and set in hand an ambitious programme to accommodate them and plan for their settlement in Britain. Initially public support for the policy stood at 6% but with the strong leadership by the government, most of the British public welcomed the new arrivals. This enlightened policy has, over time, been richly rewarded since the Uganda Asian exodus have made a huge contribution to British national life in fields as diverse as business, politics, medicine and sport.

This document brings together an edited transcript of a discussion event that brought together some key actors connected to the exodus. The exhibition illustrated the traumatic events around the exodus. It provided an account of the context for the presence of the community in East Africa; to the events in Uganda and to the extraordinary logistical effort that enabled the reception and resettlement of the refugees; an account of the discrimination and difficulties encountered by some members of the community; and of the contribution that the community has made to our national life. The discussion was chaired Praveen Moman, a former special adviser in the European Union and UK Government and Founder of Volcanoes Safaris. The panellist consisted of: Lord David Hunt, who played a vital part in facing down opposition to the policy in the Conservative Party; Nimisha Madhvani whose family were expelled in 1972 but is now Uganda's High Commissioner in London; journalist and campaigner Yasmin Alibhai-Brown; former leader of Wandsworth Council Ravi Govindia; and author and novelist Giles Foden.

The Sir Edward Heath Charitable Foundation owns and manages Sir Edward's former home, Arundells in the Salisbury Cathedral Close. Our primary purpose is to allow the public to enjoy the beauty of the house and its unique collection of art, Oriental ceramics, historical and political artifacts and musical and sailing memorabilia. We also seek to use our exhibition and speaker programme to highlight events from the dawn of the Second World War to Sir Edward's death in 2005 and their relevance to Britain and international relations today. Hence the decision of the Trustees to stage the exhibition and discussion event to what is widely recognised to have been a seminal event in British politics of the 1970s and a clear example of political courage and integrity.

The exhibition was made possible by the generosity of the Ahluwalia Family Foundation and of the Rumi Foundation. The launch event and this publication have been enabled by the generous sponsorship of Volcanoes Safaris. Thanks, are also due to Shobha Philips, Manaj Patel, Lord Jitesh Gadhia, Praveen Moman and Ravi Govindia for loaning items for the exhibition and to our Arundells team including Kate Walter, Jess Kay, Emma Golby-Kirk and our volunteers.

It has been my pleasure and privilege to have brought together the exhibition and its supporting events.

Edward Bickham
Trustee
November 2022

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Introduction

by Praveen Moman, Chair of the Panel

Praveen Moman: Thank you, Edward Bickham for putting together a fantastic exhibition on the Expulsion of the Ugandan Asians.

Isn't England an amazing country? I've had the privilege tonight to meet the 761st Mayor of Salisbury. Now, there are not many other countries in the world where you randomly rock up somewhere, as they say in modern English, and meet a mayor who's been around so long, so to speak. This is continuity and this is the history of Britain, isn't it? This is so different from many parts of the world where some of us are connected and where we have lived through so much change, so much upheaval during our lives and that of our parents.

This is a special evening at Edward Heath's house. Let me just canter through a thousand years of East African history to set the scene. I will introduce our distinguished panel shortly, to discuss their views on this remarkable story.

On the 4th of August, 1972, President Idi Amin of Uganda, a former warrant officer in the British King's African Rifles, announced that the British Asians were to be expelled in 90 days. Even though they held British passports, there was, inevitably, controversy about whether Britain would accept them. The Sunday Telegraph held President Amin responsible and blamed black racialism. Nothing much has changed there, I think. The New York Times blamed the Indians and Pakistani migrants, as they called them, for not integrating enough. The Times of India was concerned about the repatriation of assets. The President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda called the expulsion, 'Terrible, horrible, abominable, and shameful.' Amin's government said, 'Kaunda is an imperialist agent and a black sheep among African leaders,' a strong riposte. Elspeth Huxley, the famous writer from Kenya, from a settler family, commented in one short sentence. She said, 'The trouble with Ugandan Asians is success.' The Kenyans sealed their border to prevent Ugandan Asians going to Kenya. And coincidentally they still would not let me in when I arrived in Nairobi 20 years later as part of a European Union delegation in 1982.

Let me say something about my father's reaction to the Amin announcement. How should I describe my father? I have to be careful as my family is in the room. My father was a man who lived on his own planet he was a wanderer and explorer. Unperturbed by the announcement by Amin on the 4th of August, on the 5th of August he set off on his last safari to see the tree climbing lions in western Uganda! My mother's reaction is not recorded but can be imagined.

Prime Minister Edward Heath, faced with all these different responses, gave a very clear response. He said, 'This is our duty, there can be no equivocation of this, these are British subjects with British passports, they are being expelled from their country, which in many cases, is the land of their birth. They are entitled to come here, and they will be welcome here.' So, let us acknowledge Edward Heath right at the beginning.

His leadership changed the fate of Ugandan Asians. It could have turned out very differently but for his and his government. David Hunt who was Leader of the Young Conservatives then will talk about the experience of the inside story of the Conservative party at the time. I note that my father, who worked for the colonial administration for many years in the British system in East Africa and was later a resettlement officer for the Asians in the London Borough of Haringey, said in his writings, which we're going to be publishing shortly, that, 'British policy for Ugandan Asians was ambiguous and contradictory. Edward Heath's bold assertion of British responsibility to its subjects caused by the Amin expulsion helped solve the issue.'

So why did we have Indians in East Africa, why did we have them in Uganda? Well, of course, the Indian Ocean is connected to Africa and India. Indians dominated trade in the Zanzibari Sultanate in the 19th Century to such an extent that Sir Richard Burton unkindly referred to them as, 'The local Jews'. After 1884, as you know, the management of Africa changed, so to speak, as the Berlin Conference gave the European powers control over Africa which saw dramatic political change there, which we are not going to discuss today. In 1896, some 30,000 Indian craftsman, surveyors and labourers were brought by Britain to Mombasa on the coast of Kenya to build the infamous Uganda railway. Some 2,600 died just as a matter of course, and in Victoria's Tin Dragon, a book written by Satya Sood, who happens to be a cousin, and 'a railway child' he describes the huge endeavour by Indians in building the railway. He also explained how a Sikh turban was very handy in these circumstances - for protection against the sun, sweat, mosquitoes. It can be used as a rope, a bandage, and a water filter, so I commend a Sikh turban to all of you.

So why did we have Indians in East Africa, why did we have them in Uganda?

With the railway, of course, came the white missionary, the settler, the British administrator, and his Indian subordinate administrator and the fearless dukawalla. The dukan in Hindustani is a shop and the dukawallas of East Africa are legendary for spreading commerce throughout East Africa. I think Napoleon's description of the British being a nation of shopkeeper's pales in comparison. And amongst this band of entrepreneurs, the charming Allidina Visram became the leading merchant from Nairobi to Uganda. There could be a whole discussion about his life and work itself. He became the richest man in East Africa by the time he died in Uganda in 1916.

One of the most well-known visitors to East Africa at the turn of the century was Winston Churchill. Churchill went to many countries and recorded his views in his distinct way. Sometimes it's hard to agree with him, for some of us, but in the case of East Africa his 1907 essay 'My African Journey' written when he visited Kenya and Uganda as Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, he summed up the situation there really well. In a piece that The Guardian might have called, 'Race and class in the empire,' which you wouldn't normally expect Churchill to be associated with, he documents accurately the racial situation in the region at the time. 'The Colonists Association in Nairobi says, 'We aim to make East Africa (Kenya today) a white man's country.' He then notes, 'The Indian was here long before the first (British) official, and he constructed the railway, and the Sikh soldier pacified all these areas, and the Indian

trader has penetrated where no white man would go, and the Asian's industry and business aptitudes is what gives him economic superiority.'

There is a strong characterisation of the role of the different races: 'It's not against the black man that the prejudice or interests of the white settler or trader are arrayed, it is the brown man who is the rival of the European.' Churchill felt racial division was the big thing in East Africa and he also felt that the problems of East Africa - social, racial, economic were the problems of the world. His analysis showed what life was like in the early years of the British Empire in East Africa, how things worked, how the Empire was opening, there was prosperity, there was a growing economy, but there were divisions. Colonial life, schooling, job promotion, housing, hotels, clubs, land ownership was segregated. The Indians occupied the middle and the lower levels of society, except for the wealthy few. The Africans were largely at the lower end. As Yasmin says in her book, 'Colour coded class divisions between whites, blacks, and browns became ever more embedded and unyielding. Ugandan Asians kept their heads down, built up more acquisitive middle-class lives.' These differences, of course, then come to haunt us in the post-independence years. But perversely, and I think this is something that I think is written less about, during the colonial period the Indians were not only economic rivals but they worked in partnership as administrators and kept the sinews of administration together more than in any other part of the empire, despite not always being treated well by their European masters.

Nowhere else, away from India of course, did you have Indian administrators in these numbers as you had in East Africa. For example, by the 1950s, there were possibly about 500 British civil servants in East Africa and about 7,500 Indians in the civil services. In my own extended family, in 1927 my great uncle Charanji Lal Phakey from the village of Katani Kalan near Ludhiana in Punjab, pitched a tent some twenty miles from the source of the great river Nile in Uganda where it was not uncommon for a leopard to skulk. From this tent, Phakey became His Majesty King George V's postmaster, King George V's Postmaster at Iganga not far from where Ravi and Nimisha on the panel have grown up. And he was the third of my father's great uncles to work in the colonial service in East Africa from 1905 onwards. My father joined in 1937. There were many thousands from the Punjab who worked as postmasters and stationmasters and telegraphists, a vital link with the outside world.

Let's move to the 1950s and 60s in this final part of this look at what life was like in Uganda. We then had about 80,000 Asians, it is said, who lived in Uganda. Some were British subjects, some were Indian citizens, some Pakistanis, some whose nationality was not clear given their movement across different states.

When I was born in the mid-1950s it appeared that the sun would never set on the African empire. The first school, I attended aged 6, was called European Primary School, an apt description, a school for European children and which had a handful of Indian pupils, but not black African children. I learnt to sing, rather badly, Onward, Christian Soldiers, which has helped me a lot in life although not being born a Christian! In 1962 Uganda became independent from the UK in a relatively smooth transition. But during the next ten years, until the expulsion of the Asians in 1972, although superficially the country appeared stable, politics in the country were turbulent. That's

the period our panel will really look at later. Newly elected Prime Minister Milton Obote and President Freddie Mutesa, the former Kabaka of the Buganda Kingdom, struggled for power and by 1966 Mutesa had gone into exile to the U.K, where he had been at school. Obote seized the presidency and gradually established a one-party state and began to reveal a darker side to his politics. A number of prominent figures were imprisoned. Under the Common Man's charter, about 60% of the major industries were nationalised. These changes are recorded in *Tides of Fortune*, the memoir of Manubhai Madhvani's life, written with co-author Giles Foden who is here with us today. So suddenly, you have a White administration in the country until 1962, doing what it feels is right and then you have a Black led government after independence who are, of course, not very keen on the past, more socialist in their thinking and want to change the world.

So, the status of Asians - their nationality, their identity, in the newly independent country, now run by black African politicians, changed overnight. There was increasing pressure on Asians to have African partners in business, trading licences were restricted, and demands made that they become citizens of Uganda and renounce their British or Indian nationality. Many Asian families started leaving the country or sending their children abroad for studies. And these actions by the Obote government are often criticised and possibly justifiably. The black led government had to also, quite rightly, look after the majority of their citizens and provide for them in the new country. Unfortunately, political tensions in the country continued between the different factions and in early 1971, while President Obote was attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Singapore, Idi Amin, the army commander took power in a coup. He started the reign of terror against the African population, who suffered much more than the Asians, and Uganda started falling apart. In 1972, he expelled the Asians.

These are the notes from my father's exit from Uganda, when he left on the 26th of October 1972. In his exercise book he said, 'The ring is closing in, 25 springs have passed in Uganda, I have felt part of this country. On this last night, I think of the ground I have trodden, far off places in the hidden valleys, remote rivulets and tracks. I will always think of this country with extreme affection and my heart will always be here. I would like to go back to East Africa, our country, we have lost a paradise which will not be regained.'

So, I hope my sketch of events in Uganda that led to the Asian expulsion by Amin sets the scene to the discussion by the panel. There are many sides to this story. Let me now finally turn to our illustrious panel. Nimisha is the High Commissioner for the Republic of Uganda, so that is another twist to this story, that, for the second time in London we have an Indian-origin High Commissioner for the Ugandan government in London.

She is part of the Madhvani family, who are a well-known family in Uganda, as many of you will know, and she grew up on the family sugar estate in Kakira, ten miles from Jinja, the town where Ravi where was born. She is a long-term Ugandan diplomat and one of the few of Indian origin. She was at school in England at the time of the expulsion. Then we have, of course, David Hunt, who many of you will know. He's been involved with the Conservative party since the time of Edward Heath and also with

Arundells Foundation for many years. He had at a very crucial role in the events related to the Asian expulsion in 1972. He was Chairman of the Young Conservatives and mobilised the huge membership that it had, in changing the policy of the Conservative party. He's going to talk about his involvement with those events and how it affected his political thinking and career. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown is a writer and a commentator. She wants to be controversial. She was born in Uganda in an Ismaili family. She's the author of the *Settler's Cookbook*, which you may have read, which has some wonderful family recipes mixed in with her life's journey. She was at Oxford at the time of the expulsion.

Giles Foden, again, well-known journalist and author, long connections with Africa and partly grew up in Uganda. He wrote *The Last King of Scotland*, which is an intriguing novel based on Amin, also became a film. He's the co-author of a book called *The Tide of Fortune* with Manubhai Madhvani, one of the main industrialists of Uganda. And last but not least, Councillor Ravi Govindia. Ravi has been leader of Wandsworth Council until May this year. I don't know where the Conservative activists were, but they threw him out at the election. He's one of the longest serving and respected Tory Council leaders in Britain. He was born in Jinja and, in my opinion, tried to make Wandsworth like the small heimat or beautiful town of Jinja.

In between doing those things, he's been responsible for the redevelopment of the Nine Elms Area, which includes the American Embassy and the Battersea Power Station and he will tell us about life in Dartmoor which is where he went where he left Uganda. So, all three of the Ugandan Indians on stage, Ravi, Yasmin and Nimisha grew up in Uganda and have parallel lives, similar sort of ages but, obviously, different circumstances. Let's start with Nimisha. Nimisha, what did you family do in Uganda and what was it like growing up there?

An Exhibition at Arundells (Exodus: The Uganda Asians Crisis of 1972)

Exodus: The Ugandan Asians Crisis Fifty Years On



Arundells, August 12th – November 1st 2022



Alamy

On 4th August 1972, Ugandan President, Idi Amin, announced that almost the entire Asian population of his country would face expulsion within 90 days. He saw an opportunity to 'Africanise' Uganda and to plunder the assets of the Asian middle class. Over 30,000 of the Asians held British passports – albeit since legislation in the 1960s they conferred no automatic right of settlement in Britain.

Some argued that Britain had no special responsibility and initially only 6% of the population supported Edward Heath's Government's decision to offer refuge to all those UK passport holders facing expulsion.

This exhibition tells the story of the expulsion and how Britain welcomed and planned to integrate the refugees. In an effort unique since the Second World War, a huge voluntary effort was mobilised to establish sixteen Re-settlement Centres and then to support 28,600, largely destitute, new arrivals as they sought to navigate the British housing and jobs markets.

The exhibition describes the political struggle to make the arrivals welcome – in the face of anti-immigrant sentiment stirred by Enoch Powell and his notorious 'Rivers of Blood' speech – and to mobilise an international coalition of countries willing to find homes for those Asians who had been stripped of their Ugandan citizenship and, thereby, been made stateless.



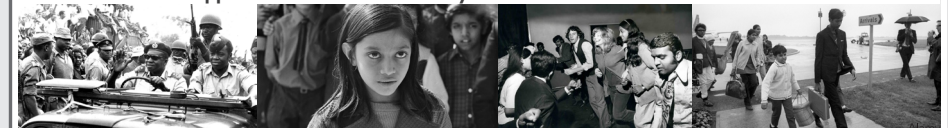
Alamy

In his autobiography, Edward Heath wrote: 'We did what any civilised nation would do, by taking the greater share of the emigrants. I have never regretted this, for the Uganda Asians have brought a wealth of endeavour, enterprise and natural talent to these shores.'

The compassion shown at that time has been rewarded by the extraordinary contribution made to British society by the Ugandan Asian community to the economies of a number of key British cities and to the worlds of business, politics, journalism, science and sport.

The 'Ugandan Asians Crisis Fifty Years On' exhibition is the story of remarkable human resilience and of the importance of political leadership and decency.

With the kind support of the Ahluwalia Family Foundation and the Rumi Foundation.



British Indians in East Africa

British colonisation of East Africa began around 1866. Indian traders were already well established in the region and the Imperial East Africa Company (established in 1888) encouraged their settlement to help develop the new territories not only as indentured labourers but also as traders, clerks, artisans, policemen and soldiers.

In 1894 the British Crown created the Uganda Protectorate and around that time 32,000 labourers were brought from India to build a railway from Kenya's coast to the shores of Lake Victoria – 2,500 died during its construction but 6,500 of them stayed on. A further influx was triggered by a famine in Gujarat in 1899.



Construction of the railway and a map of the route of the Uganda Railway.

In 1908 Churchill observed that 'it is the Indian trader who, penetrating deeper and maintaining himself in all sorts of places to which no white man could go, more than anyone else developed the beginnings of trade. It was by Indian labour that the one vital railway on which everything else depended was constructed. It is the Indian banker who supplies perhaps the larger part of the capital for businesses.'



Winston Churchill.

The community comprised Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs from Gujarat and Punjab and Christians from Goa. They formed a strata between the British and the Africans. They came to dominate much of the economy, such as cotton ginning, coffee, finance and trade. Many Africans perceived them as keeping business relationships within their community.

At independence in 1962, East African Asians retained the right to British citizenship. They also had a two-year window within which to opt for citizenship of their country of residence. In Uganda, President Milton Obote, pressed ahead with policies designed to disadvantage Asians and to promote Africanisation.

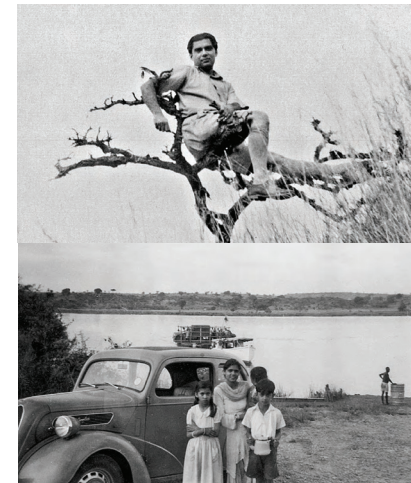


President Milton Obote at anniversary ceremony.

The drive for Africanisation in East Africa led some Asians to move to Britain. By 1968, the numbers coming from Kenya topped 1,000 per month, leading the then Labour Government to rush the Commonwealth Immigration Act through Parliament. This removed an automatic right of entry to the UK for Asian passport holders. Home Secretary, James Callaghan, argued that the Act was intended 'not to deny the right of entry but to control it'. Indeed, it provided a voucher system for Asians from East Africa – originally capped annually at 1,500 heads of household – or about 7,000 individuals.

The Moman Family – a case study I

Kuldip Rai Moman was born in Punjab 1918. At 18, he followed in the footsteps of his uncles and moved to East Africa. He initially served in the Kenya Colony and then moved to the Uganda Protectorate. He served as a Postmaster in many upcountry stations – sometimes the only individual representing the Crown in remote areas, with a critical role in opening up these territories. Kuldip was always restless and his curiosity made him an inveterate explorer and wanderer.



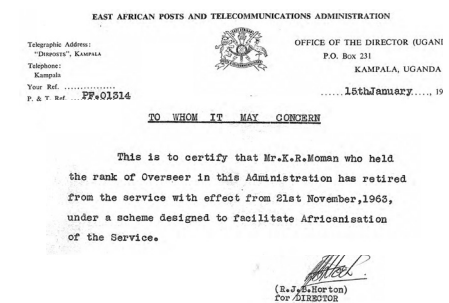
Kuldip Moman loved the wildlife and people of Africa.

By the 1960s the family were settled in Kampala. In 1964, two years after independence, he was obliged to take retirement as part of the Africanisation of the Civil Service. In his leaving speech he emphasised 'the cordial relations that have existed between the African and Asian staff'.



Kuldip Moman with post office colleagues in Kampala, 1960.

In 1953, Kuldip and his wife, Kaushalya became naturalised British subjects. He explained: 'I had come to East Africa with a British Empire of India passport and later had a British Kenyan and British Ugandan passport, working for the British Colonial Government. We thought that our future lay with the British. So we became naturalised British subjects. We discovered later that our status was not as clear as we had imagined as Britain became more ambiguous about its colonial subjects, especially those who were Brown'.



After leaving the Post Office, Kuldip became field manager for an insurance company and later established his own brokerage. This involved him travelling some 2,000 miles a month – his wandering soul described these as 'days of rapture'. He described his Indian clients as: 'still the backbone of Uganda; shopkeepers and traders, entrepreneurs and hustlers. They were the people who made the economy work.' Of his 500 African clients he said: 'they are angels, I have only love for the people of this country.'

On one occasion he met Idi Amin, at that time Head of the Army. 'I remember a very large man, very animated, speaking very loudly. I do not remember him being hostile or unpleasant, just rather arrogant and self-obsessed.'