

## Settling in a Strange Foreign Land by Anwar Khan

In 1963, Kenya received independence from British rule. The 2nd or 3rd generation Asians were offered the choice of either becoming Kenyan Citizens or if applicable to remain British subjects. Some African countries had already received independence from their European rulers, but this had led to tribal warfare, such as the Congo where tribal leaders were more powerful than the government and for this reason many Asians were apprehensive about Kenyan citizenship as they felt that the educated middle class African would be preferred for better positions in the job market so they chose to retain British "citizenship". Gradually these subjects started applying for visas to the UK and started moving. In 1968 non-national Kenyans were having difficulty holding on to jobs, let alone fill new vacancies; and the demand from the government for the ban on non-Kenyans from owning a shop or trading in the municipal markets led to an exodus of thousands of Kenyan Asians to Britain. In Kenya some Asians worked in offices, banks, governmental departments, others were engineers, mechanics or in industry and some were small businessmen. Arriving to Britain they were shocked, to say the least, that they found Europeans either as labourers, factory workers, road sweepers or in other menial jobs. This was a new phenomenon because in Kenya the menial jobs were for the African and Europeans were in high respectable positions. Asians found that the factory workers and labourers in general were pretty well paid so most of them sought such employment. No sooner had the Kenyan Asians settled in their new homes. the Uganda Asians were expelled in 1972. The UK was suddenly flooded with Asians, not only from Africa, but also from India and Pakistan, some seeking political asylum, others further education and yet many illegally.



Before coming to the UK, the East African Asian faced two major problems, firstly the getting of the visas - the British Government had put in some stringent tests to undergo and secondly the finances required were more than anything than ever before. After successfully getting the visas, the only option was to take loans and rely on the good nature of some well to do friends. So we arrived here, obliged to friends and relatives that had kept us in their houses until suitable accommodation had been found but more importantly, penniless in a strange and foreign land. In general it was found to be a struggle to settle initially. The houses were not built for accommodating large families, as was the case with many. Some families had siblings in double figures of which the younger ones, were at best still in their teens. The older brothers even had their own wives and children. Only a few families actually owned their own properties in Kenya whereas the others did not have the finance to buy houses. For the first few years hardly anybody bought a house here and the thought was that they will make quick money and head "back home". Where this "back home" was; remained a mystery. By the mid-1970's, the immigrants started to realise that this was now home and to better themselves they saw the opportunity of owning their own houses due to the easy to re-pay mortgage facilities. People that had not been able to buy a house in Africa and had generally been

hand to mouth in a non-welfare society could now purchase a house that could become a home. Of course the larger families had to have more than just one house as 3 up 2 down homes could not accommodate multiple members of family. The married siblings had to move out and buy their own houses. Sound employment of various kinds had been found so more or less everybody started settling down. Some ventured into small businesses, generally as shopkeepers. The problem hitherto had been the availability of halal meat and Asian food provisions. In London, people would go to areas such as Southall to purchase speciality items and while there they would go to the Asian restaurants and hopefully watch the latest Indian film. From a social point of view, cricket and hockey teams were formed. The grounds hired were the recreation parks which were not of a high standard but at least friends met and could get away from the stresses of daily life.



Talking about social life, a great event that one looked forward to was a wedding. In those days school halls or town halls were hired. Friends of the groom and/or bride would volunteer to help lay the tables, mostly in 2 or 3 rows and then the meal would be served, perhaps in 2 or 3 seatings because invitations would be extended to whole families and as the RSVP system did not exist, one never knew the total of attendees. The menu was simply Pilau and Shora (Meat curry) followed by Zarda (Sweet Saffron flavoured rice). Specialist cooks and friends would gather at the house of the bride or groom the night before and cooking would start around 8pm and go on till 3 or 4am. Cutlery would be hired and all the work was done by friends. One misses the special taste of that food.

Now in the early 21st century some of us early settlers get together and talk of the days in Africa. Recollections are wonderful but most of us know that, that world does not exist anymore and a misra (couplet) of a ghazal by that great urdu poet of the 1850's, Sheikh Ibrahim Zauq, comes to mind; WAQT - e - PEERI SHABAB KI BAATEIN AISI HEIN JAISE KHWAB KI BAATEIN (To talk of youth in old age - Recalls a dream of distant days)