

## British East African Origins by Anwar Khan

British East Africans of Indo/Pak origins have evolved to belong to a fairly rare group of people. In the late 1890's Indians were recruited to help the British build a railway line from the coast of Mombasa to the land locked and fertile Uganda. In total some 32,000 Indians were recruited to build the railway of which over 6,500 exercised their option to remain and work in the protectorate once the construction of the railway was over. 2,000 of these were employed in the various railway departments.

The settlers then started inviting family and friends to join them for a better, adventurous and perhaps a more secure life style. Many traders also came over to exploit the possibilities of starting and developing business opportunities. Many of these traders were not only successful but ended up becoming household names, such as Alladin Visram, Alibhai Jeevanjee, Suleman Virjee, Chaudhry Mauladad, Sheikh Fazal Illahi etc. Of course some of the Asians were skilled artisans, such as carpenters, masons and blacksmiths. Of these some blacksmiths turned to motor mechanics, some carpenters to timber merchants and started furniture factories and the masons built up construction companies. Some of the contractors pioneered in the quarrying operations near Quarry Road and Eastleigh. Through these, the influence of the Asians on Kenya's construction and architecture became entrenched in building and construction in Kenya.



### ***Halqa-e Fuftoosh (circle of wisdom)***

**Seated L to R:** Saeed Farzandali Shah, Akran Khan, Sheikh Muhamed Ismail, Mumtaz Quraishy, Abdul Latif Khan, Mohamed Sadiq, Mohamed Ayub, Fazal Hussein Qureshy, Gulam Ahmed Mir.

**Seated on Carpet L to R:** Manzoor Haider, Mohammed Saddique Baghban, Mohsin Ali Shah.

**Standing L to R:** Abdul Khaliq Dar, Mohamed Amin, Shamas Deen, Khawar Rashid, Abdul Hamid Wali Mohamed, Akram Niaz

The prospects for the betterment of life in Africa were promising. Not only were many employed by the Railways, a few entrepreneurs started business, yet others joined the police force, the army and other government organisations as civil servants. Although the best positions were reserved for

Europeans, a few Asians managed to work their way through. Lala Ghulam Hassan (Tariq and Arif Hassan's father) and Abu Bakr became postmasters in Eldoret and Kitale - of course under protest from the local European settlers. Another remarkable figure was Sheikh Ayub Ali (father of SAMC cricketers.

Mehboob Ali, Mubarak Ali and Azhar Ali), who started life as a civil servant at the age of 16 and ended as Deputy Establishment Officer - the highest position an Asian could achieve in colonial times. He was awarded with first the MBE and then the OBE.

As Nairobi was expanding rapidly every community formed social interaction associations and sports institutions. For the Muslims interesting names such as The Qasab Association, The Luhar Association, The Kashmiri Association can be found in the annals. However the most successful club that was founded was of course Sir Ali Muslim Club. Other communities had formed their own clubs as well, such as SVIG Indian Gymkhana, Patel Club, Sikh Union and Kathiawar Club. One has to admire the people of the times as one considers that not only did the Indians and then the separated nation of Pakistan, bring their culture to Africa but also remained strong in their religious beliefs. This led to the construction of Masjids, Mandirs and Gurudwaras, many of which remain iconic sites in the major cities to date.



In 1963, Kenya became independent. This was a very confusing time for the Asians because Africa was now home to everybody. Asians had their own schools, their own cinemas, own radio station and perhaps the sense of belonging was even stronger than one would have found in India or Pakistan. A few chose to go to overseas, particularly to England, but for the remaining uncertain thoughts of the future gave rise to scepticism.

However even during the Africanization time in the mid-60's, the Indian contractors had proven to be more competent than the indigenous Kenyan contractors. The construction firms that were owned by the Asians were the best due to a number of reasons. First, they paid attention to detail in managing their business as a whole. Secondly, they operated under tight budgets with extremely low overheads with high degrees of flexibility, for example, getting involved in the distribution of

building materials - importation, wholesale and retail networks. This made them be considered to be the backbone of the construction industry in Kenya.

However, the Africanization policy also had other negative effects on the Asian communities in Kenya. The policy was said to have derived motivation from a political angle than it did from an



This photo was taken in February 1965. A dinner party was given by the Muslim Community for becoming a republic on 12 December 1965 at the Mauladad Nursery Hall.

**Standing from left to right:** Ghilam Sarwar Qureishi, Chaudhri Mulla Siraj, Fazal Hussein Qureishi, Mwai Kibaki(former President of Kenya)

**Sitting from left to right:** Hon Tom Mboyo, Haji Illam Din, His Excellency Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, Khawaja Zafru ud Deen, Esmail Adam and Yusuf Abdulgani.

economics perspective. The policy, unfortunately, led to an acute shortage of contracting firms in Kenya. This also resulted into the lack of healthy competition between the existing contracting firms in Kenya. The height of Africanization was the year 1968. Prior to this, it must be understood, most Asians had preferred British to Kenyan citizenship. Many Asians were caught in between Kenya - a country that was undergoing nationalisation - and Britain, whose government was restricting the entry of bearers of British passports from entering the UK. Pakistan and India also barred the Asians from Kenya, technically British Kenyans, from entering their countries. Some of them were taken up by Canada and the US. This probably explains why, in some Asian-owned contracting companies, some directors indicate both British and Kenyan citizenships.

Gradually, the Asians started making arrangements to move to the UK and Canada in the main and by 1980 life for the Asian in Kenya would change forever.