

OCTOBER 9, 2013 A HISTORIC DAY FOR UGANDA ASIANS

On Uganda's Independence Day, October 9, the President of Uganda His Excellency Yoweri Kaguta Museveni bestowed Uganda's highest civilian medal on 21 Uganda Asians. The same number has been approved to be awarded at a later date. It is no secret that the names were derived from a book on Uganda Asians that one of the awardees Dr Vali Jamal is writing.



BY VALI JAMAL,
PHD

Vali Jamal has a BA from Cambridge and a PhD from Stanford. His book is called Uganda Asians: Then and Now. Here and There. It will be self-publish in March 2014. By then it'll have been almost seven years in the writing.

It was something unique that one country should award so many people of a minority at one go in celebrating fifty years of its independence. Since some of the awards went to pioneers at the start of the British Protectorate the President was honouring the contribution of the Asian community to Uganda's historical development. He was also acknowledging their continuing role in Uganda and the

wrong done to them in 1972 when the whole community, comprising some 70,000 people, was expelled by the-then president Idi Amin Dada. Only some 2,000 or so of the original Asians have returned, attracted by the restitution of their properties by President Museveni starting from 1986. That one act of the President signaled to the world that Uganda was now on a different footing. The original Asians, joined by 25 thousand or so newcomer people from India and Pakistan, have made immense contributions to the Uganda economy. Uganda African entrepreneurs and professionals have shouldered even more of the burden of driving the economy. As compared to 1972 when the 1% of the population who were Asians garnered more than half of the non-food GDP, today the 1% has Africans in the majority. Many of them too were recognized in the Independence Day awards.

Of the 21 awards given to Uganda Asians, 12 were posthumous and 9 to Asians living. Seven of those live in Uganda, of whom four collected the awards – Dr. Sudhir Ruparelia; Dr. Alex Godwin Coutinho (Goan ancestry); Mr.

Dr. Vali Jamal



Mahendra Mehta (collected by nephew Mr Hemnabh Khatau); and myself. Three awardees resident in Uganda were abroad or unable to attend the ceremony (Prof Mahmood Mamdani, Mayur Madhvani and Nitin Madhvani). Two awards went to people living abroad (Prof Dharam Ghai and Prof Tandon). The full list is shown below.

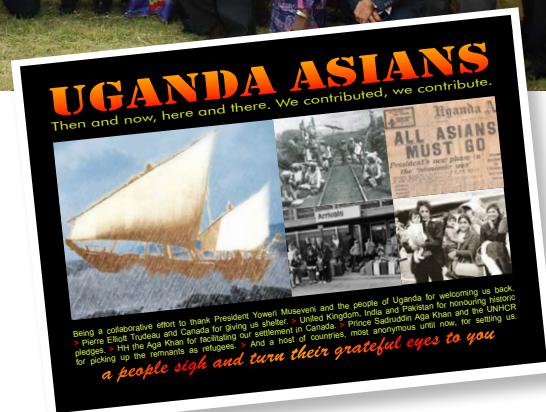
I took advantage of my 6-secs of glory on the stage to thank the President for the honour and to tell him my name and the name of the book I was writing on Uganda Asians that he had endorsed. I said now we have to launch it. As can be seen he listened bemusedly.

My book is "something else." How can it be otherwise when it has gone beyond a million words? It comprises stories in people's own words of how they coped the expulsion, where did they go, did they return. I found 100 or so of our people never left Uganda for even a day despite the deadline. Around 25 are still living in Uganda and I got the stories of most of them. Nearly 5,000 Asian people were still in Uganda at the last week of the deadline, hoping to make a go of their confirmed citizenship. They gave in when the dictator threatened to rusticate them among the nomadic Karamoja people. They were picked up by the UNHCR and taken to five refugee centres and dispersed from there to over 20 countries all over the world. I have the stories of 20 or so of those real refugees. People started trickling back to Uganda on the fall of Amin, in 1979. I have almost 50 of those stories. I have 30 or so stories of people's childhood in Uganda and 15 or so stories of people pioneering in England before the mid-1950 and Canada around the mid-1960. I have nearly 100 stories of pioneers to Uganda, recounted by their descendants.

The book has archival material from Canada, USA, UK, India and UNHCR sources to document those countries' and the UN agency's role in Uganda Asians' resettlement. India had no



☞ Asians kneeling L2R – Dr. Sudhir Ruparelia; Dr. Vali Jamal, Mr. Hemnabh Khatau (receiving for uncle Mahendra Mehta); standing to left of President – Dr. Alex Godwin Coutinho



hesitation to take in its citizens but balked at accepting any British passport-holders to help out the British government. Canada (Prime Minister Trudeau) and UNHCR (High Commissioner Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan) are heroes to Uganda Asians as also His Highness the Aga Khan for resettling some of the stateless Asians in Canada. The British simply bowed to their legal obligations to accept their subjects.

It's a million-words book for no more than 7,000 Uganda Asian households with pre-1972 connections with Uganda. If half of them buy the book that would be a blockbuster, but sales was never the thing in writing this book, simply that our history should be preserved, this being almost our last chance for that. The national medals to me and 41 other Uganda Asians is a reward for my work, as also the President's endorsement of the book as a "national asset." The icing on the cake will be that my book is acknowledged in serious newspapers and journals.

ASIAN AWARDS ON OCTOBER 9

Politicians: Sir Amar Nath Maini; Sugra Visram; Shafiq Arain; Gurdial Singh; Anil Clerk; BKS Verjee, CBE; P I Patel; A G Mehta.

Academics: Prof Dharam Ghai; Prof Yash Tandon; Prof Mahmood Mamdani; Dr. Vali Jamal; Dr. Alex Godwin Coutinho.

Social Services: Dr. Mukhtar Ahmad; S S Gupta; T S Chaudry; Dr. Mustapha.

Enterprise: Dr. Sudhir Ruparelia; Mahendra Mehta; Mr. Mayur Madhvani; Mr. Nitin Madhvani.