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culture politics

How Ugandan Asians are keeping their history alive, 50 years after expulsion from their homes

The forced expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972 is still raw for many. Half a century later, they share how the anniversary helps keep their history alive, and how they made UK cities like Leicester their home.

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“I’ll never forget my mum and dad losing me at the airport,” says Nisha. She was only four years old when **Ugandan army** soldiers snatched gold wedding jewellery from her mother’s neck and wrists, witnessing the anguish as government officials stripped their belongings – and identity – away. It was lucky the family ended up reuniting just before boarding their plane from Kakira, Uganda to the UK in October, 1972.

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“My family had to leave their home and couldn’t even bring any savings, just a suitcase full of clothes and £50 in cash,” says Nisha, who preferred not to use her last name in this interview, and whose family settled in Leicester. “They didn’t speak English. It was like starting all over again in an alien country.”



Nisha and her mother outside their home, 1972, Kakira, Uganda. Image courtesy of Nisha

August 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of the Ugandan Asian expulsion in which the dictator Idi Amin gave Asians of Indian descent just 90 days to pack up their lives and leave the country. [Amin](#), who ruled as Uganda’s third president from 1971 to 1979, is regarded as one of history’s most cruel dictators. Upon seizing power in a military coup, he outlined his immediate [intentions](#) to remove Asians living in Uganda, openly

accusing them of engaging in unethical business practices and ethnic elitism, and threatening to send those who stayed to concentration camps.

More than 60,000 Asians were expelled from Uganda between August and November 1972, many of them moving to the UK. According to the [Home Office](#), roughly 27,000 Asians with British passports settled in cities like Leicester, [Birmingham](#), [Manchester](#) and [London](#), where communities of Ugandan Asians have since thrived.

Five decades after they were forcibly exiled from their homes amid conflict and violence, Ugandan Asians in Leicester – home to the [UK's largest Asian population](#) – are not only reflecting on the effects of the expulsion and coping with the trauma it caused, but also looking ahead to the future of their community.



Nisha in her hometown of Kakira, Uganda. Image courtesy of Nisha

The expulsion

In the 1970s, [racial, social, and economic tensions](#) – all legacies of British colonial control – increased. The British government had allowed citizens of India – a country under direct British rule – to settle there after Uganda was declared a [protectorate](#), sending over 40,000 people from India as labourers in 1896 to build a railway that would run from Kenya to Uganda. The British had also invested in the education of the Asian minority over the education of Ugandans, and schooling and healthcare was racially segregated under colonial control. Although Asians made up just [1% of Uganda's population, they earned one fifth of the nation's income](#).

Amin blamed Ugandan Asians for destroying the country's economy and promoting corruption. Upon announcing the expulsion, he claimed he was “giving Uganda back to ethnic Ugandans”.

The escape was incredibly traumatic for some, forcing them to leave behind the lives they had built. Due to my own familial connections to the exodus, I was inspired to learn more about the event for a university project in 2022. My objectives were to gather untold tales, explore feelings of disconnect from Uganda, and examine how childhood trauma might affect an adult's life.



The **BBC** reported that the first 193 Ugandan Asians arrived at Stansted Airport on 18 September 1972. Some escaped Uganda before Amin's announcement – Ramnik Varu, now 76, was among them.

Amin fired Asians from roles in trade, commerce and particularly in educational sectors. These policies meant Ramnik lost his role as a teacher, as he was considered a British national. Ramnik travelled from Uganda to Yugoslavia, lodged in a detention centre, and eventually settled in Leicester.



Ramnik Varu as a teacher with his class at the bale secondary school in Uganda. After being made redundant in his role as a teacher, Varu lost contact with his students of whom he was extremely fond of. He recalls his life as a teacher as some of his favourite days. Image courtesy of Ramnik Varu

“I didn't know where I was going, what I would do in a new country. I had no experience of leaving Uganda before,” he says.



For those like Ramnik, who remained in Leicester, there's a sense of pride for bu... ”

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lives and livelihoods over the last 50 years.

“We brought skills with us, and those skills are sitting on the Golden Mile,” says Mina Patel, who moved as a child along with her family in 1972. She’s referring to the famed Belgrave Road; a stretch of shops home to gem-filled jewellery stores, filled with the scents of incense drifting from the doorways of boutiques and saree emporiums. Here, you’ll also find tropical fruits and vegetables, and thirst-quenching coconuts alongside masala chai stalls and iconic eateries including Bobby’s restaurant. The Golden Mile is often referred to as “Little India”, providing the many home comforts missed by those who migrated.

Arriving in England

Despite what the Ugandan Asian diaspora have achieved today, Mina’s move to Leicester – and the experience of many others like her – was not what she had hoped for.

Before Mina arrived in England in October 1972, [Leicester City Council launched a campaign](#) to actively discourage Ugandan Asians from moving to the city. The city already had thousands of families on the council’s waiting list for accommodation, schools were overcrowded and social services overwhelmed, creating an anti-immigrant sentiment. Yet [10,000 survivors](#) chose to settle there.

Upon moving, Mina’s mother wrapped their family Mandir (a shrine often found in Hindu homes) in sarees and sent it by mail from Uganda to Medway Street, Leicester, but it never arrived. Exactly 10 years later, to her surprise the trunk was delivered to her

new address in 1982. Only the Mandir was inside the trunk – the sarees had been stolen and replaced with newspapers.





Left – Mina’s mother when she posted the Mandir aged 30. Right – Soon after she received it in 1982. Images courtesy of Mina Patel

“My mum came to pick me up. The next morning these little boys as I arrived in the playground, all huddled up and said, ‘Did you see what she wore? We don’t wear sari in this country’,” Mina says.

Racism was not just limited to the playground. At the time, vegetarian options for school dinners were scarce and Mina was only provided with meat, which she refused to eat, having grown up vegetarian due to religious and cultural reasons, common among many Hindus. “The dinner lady called the headmistress who said ‘there’s no other choice for you, and don’t you dare bring your religion in my country’,” she explains.

Every day since that incident, Mina took the hour-long journey to her home for lunch, ate, and then returned to school. In order to support the expanding Asian community in Leicester, her grandparents opened Bobby’s supermarket, the first Indian grocery shop in the city.



“Many exiled Asians have never returned to Uganda due to

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trauma”

Looking back, Ramnik believes the expulsion was a blessing in disguise. Before retirement, he spent 20 years teaching music in Leicestershire and helped his son launch their successful family business Spicentice. He feels the expulsion allowed Ugandan Asians to start a life in the UK that was challenging, but full of opportunity. “Although I am proud I was born [in Uganda], what can I do there? The UK is my home,” he says.

Many exiled Asians have never returned to Uganda due to the trauma. My research found that 50.6% of those expelled missed Uganda, while the other half had no desire to return.

‘We have so much to learn’

Fifty years have passed since Ramnik and others from the community moved to the UK, but in many ways it feels like little has changed for those seeking refuge here. The government is pressing through the [Nationalities and Borders Bill](#), which makes it even more difficult for [refugees to seek asylum](#) in the UK, and [dual](#) national citizenship may be revoked by the government without warning. “I think immigrants that come to this country now have a really hard time and there is a lot of negativity,” says Nisha, who is now 55, based in Leicester. But in this environment, to commemorate the exodus and reflect the tolerance of the community, many Ugandan Asians are creatively preserving their heritage through creating art inspired by these experiences.

In early August, Leicester’s Curve is staging *Finding Home: Leicester’s Ugandan Asian*

Story at 50 to commemorate the historically significant year for the city. Pieces by local playwrights include Chandni Mistry’s *Ruka*, based on a video game for families and children where a child discovers her mum’s past, Dilan Raithatha’s *Call Me By My Name*, which explores themes of self-identity, and Ashok Patel’s *Ninety Days*, a play set during the expulsion in which two couples must confront the reality of Amin’s order as the 90-day deadline draws closer. The families of each playwright all settled in Leicester from Uganda as a result of the expulsion.

“This isn’t just about South Asians, this is about British South Asians. We aren’t separate. We are part of the fabric of society”

“I’m not trying to tell the stories to the people it’s already affected. This is about opportunity to fulfil other communities who didn’t know these experiences even existed” says director of all three plays Mandeep Glover “This isn’t just about S.....



exists," says director of an award-winning play, Mandeep Grover. "This isn't just about South Asians, this is about British South Asians. We aren't separate. We are part of the fabric of society."

To inspire the stories, the Curve organised several public gatherings with Leicester's Indian community to recall their journey to the city, in a comforting setting over a cup of chai. Both Dilan and Mandeep recall that initially older community members were hesitant to share their stories.

"We asked them why they were reluctant to talk to us at the start. 'Why don't you share this with your children? Why didn't you write something from your own words?' And they said, 'no one cares about us anymore,'" says Dilan, whose paternal family were expelled by Amin.

Both Dilan and Mandeep are grateful that the trust is reciprocated from the Ugandan Asian community to tell their story. "[The play is] not for five-star reviews," says Dilan. "It's just about getting this community shown."





Many Ugandan Asians were invited to an exclusive event to see the exhibition. Image by Alexandra Johnson Photography – Navrang Arts

A short walk from The Curve through the heart of the city centre, the Leicester Museum and Art Gallery is hosting *Rebuilding Lives*, a free exhibition curated by *Navrang Arts*, a local non-profit organisation.

Visitors can read unfiltered accounts of those who fled Uganda, and reflect on the community's distinctive influence on Leicester. Ugandan Asians from across the UK contributed items for display as part of the exhibition, including school notebooks and ID cards, slingshots that children used to knock mangoes from trees, transistor radios, record players and vinyls which they managed to get past the Ugandan Army soldiers.

In helping curate the exhibition, Rebuilding Lives' project director Nisha Popat wanted to honour Ugandan Asians, including her parents. She was eight years old when she was expelled. "I always thought we were going to go back," she recalls. "I knew there was tension in the house. I knew mum was unpacking. I knew they were upset. But in my mind it was this holiday."

Over the last six months, alongside gathering information and artefacts, the exhibition team has helped reunite long-lost relatives and friends.



happened in 1972, even if it triggers upsetting feelings for us.

This article was amended on 5 August to remove a line stating that “Amin was allegedly intimidated by Ugandan Asians”.

This article was also amended on 10 August, to change the headline from ‘homeland’ to ‘home’, and to include more context around the history behind the resettlement of Indians to Uganda, and the racial, social, and economic factors surrounding the expulsion.

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