



**DAVID  
BLY**  
HERITAGE

**W**hen Mansoor Latha and his family arrived in Canada in 1972, they had only \$1,000 with which to make a new start.

They were among thousands of people forced out of newly independent African countries for simply being what they were — African-born but of Indian ancestry.

"We were loyal to Africa and we were expelled overnight," said Latha, one of about 8,000 Ismaili Muslims in Calgary, the vast majority of whom were driven out of East Africa.

"We came here with a heavy heart, but we were so well received. This is our country now. We're going to be here forever. Canada is our home."

Within a few months of arriving in Canada, he had resumed his career as a journalist, taking a job as a copy editor with the Edmonton Journal.

He went into semi-retirement after 25 years as publisher of the Morinville Mirror and the Redwater Tribune which he recently sold to Bowes Publishing. He now works part time as an editor for a Calgary publishing company.

Latha is writing a book about the Ismaili Muslims who have settled in Canada after being forced to flee Africa. He hopes to create a record of the history and experiences of the refugees, as well as adding to Canadians' understanding of the Ismaili dispersion.

Latha has often been asked what part of India he's from. Eyebrows sometimes go up when he says he's from Africa.

While his ancestors came from the Indian subcontinent, he has no connection with India or Pakistan.

"Most of us are third-generation, born and bred in Africa," he said.

"Our ancestors were brought to East Africa by the British colonial government to build the railways. They stayed on as settlers."

Latha was born and educated in Tanzania, on the east coast of Africa. As in neighbouring countries, much of Tanzania's commerce was in the hands of Asians, the term used there for people of Indian and Pakistani ancestry.

Many of Latha's generation had also become professionals, such as doctors and lawyers.

When Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya became independent in the early 1960s, Asians could become citizens or could take up British citizenship.

"The Aga Khan (the spiritual leader of the world's Ismaili Muslims) advised us to take up local citizenship and be law-abiding citizens," said Latha.

"All of us (Ismailis) took up local citizenship, although some Asians, mostly Hindus, became British citizens. We considered Africa our home."

In the 1970s, the East African countries started an aggressive policy of socialism, and the Asians suffered as a result.

"They nationalized businesses without compensation," said Latha. "My parents, in a country with no pension, became penniless. We found we were second-class citizens."

Things became worse in Uganda when Idi Amin seized



David Bly, Calgary Herald

**Mansoor Latha at the Calgary Ismaili Jamatkhana, where Calgary's Ismaili Muslims worship.**

# Out of Africa

Thousands of Ismaili Muslims expelled from their African homelands in the 1970s have thrived in Canada

power in 1972 and declared Uganda was a black man's country.

Salim Tejani, now owner of a Calgary restaurant, was 21, and heavily involved in his family's businesses, which included plantations and a coffee processing plant that exported 20,000 tonnes of coffee each year, a stone quarry that supplied many major projects in the country, and a cattle ranch.

Tejani remembers the day Amin declared Africa was for Africans. He had just opened a new venture — an ice cream factory — when Amin announced that all foreign nationals had to leave the country within 90 days.

"We were born there, we grew up there," said Tejani. "We said OK, we're staying — we are citizens."

But within a short time, he and the other Ugandan-born Asians had their passports cancelled, their property confiscated and their bank accounts frozen.

"We were stateless," Tejani said.

The so-called foreign nationals were allowed to withdraw enough money for one-way

fare to another country, and the equivalent of about \$150 in foreign currency.

Some 80,000 Ismailis were expelled from Uganda. Amin was responsible for the death of hundreds of thousands of Ugandans — there is no doubt today among Asians that had they stayed, they would have been victims of genocide.

Tejani and his wife, who was expecting their first child, flew to Britain where they lived in a refugee camp set up on an RAF base.

Latha said Amin's actions in Uganda were a wakeup call for Asians in neighbouring countries.

"Everyone started sending at least one member of the family out to other countries, so they would have a place to go," he said.

Latha came to Canada with his wife and two-year-old son. Currency controls meant they could bring only \$500 per adult with them. Later, he was able to help bring his parents to Canada.

"I was so pro-African, I never would have left, but things changed so drastically," he said. "We were not wanted as a race. We were a displaced

people."

Through the efforts of the Aga Khan, other countries agreed to take in the refugees, and they were scattered over the world. Britain took in 20,000, the U.S. took 50,000, and 75,000 came to Canada.

Tejani and his family came to Canada in 1977. He worked for a few years, then went into business for himself. While there's a tinge of bitterness in his voice about what he lost to Uganda's madman, he doesn't regret coming here.

"Canada is a great country," he said. "It's a free country that lets you practise what you want. There's respect for everyone; people know how to live together."

Tejani said the terrible experiences of Uganda would fill a large book.

"It's very pathetic that it happened," he said. "but all the people who came to Canada are happy."

Latha said Canada's role in taking in the refugees has earned the praise of the Aga Khan for its treatment of refugees and its multiculturalism.

"The Aga Khan is a great admirer of Canada's multicultural policies," said Latha. As a result, he's putting \$4 million toward a global centre for pluralism in Ottawa, with the Canadian government providing \$3 million.

The money comes from the Aga Khan Foundation, the largest non-governmental development agency in the world.

Latha said he welcomes contact with anyone who wants to share their experiences, particularly people who had problems with the Amin regime. He can be reached at 226-2214.