

The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project

An Oral History with Senator Mobina Jaffer

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Narrator: Mobina Jaffer
Researcher: Shezan Muhammedi
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Abstract:

Senator Mobina Jaffer was born in Kampala Uganda and was the first of six children. She attended several Aga Khan schools from kindergarten to high school. She even received a scholarship for a high school exchange program in the United States and spent a year studying in Washington. She had just completed her law degree from London University and returned to Uganda when the expulsion decree was announced.

Senator Jaffer reflected on the trauma that ensued in Uganda following the expulsion period particularly for her family as both her father and her husband were kidnapped by the Ugandan military. Fortunately, due to close relations with several Ugandan Africans, Senator Jaffer's family was able to flee the country along with her husband to London, England. Eventually they moved to Vancouver in 1975 as Senator Jaffer's father had always dreamed of retiring in Vancouver.

Senator Jaffer became a lawyer in 1978 and served as the first female South Asian lawyer in Canada. She entered politics in the 1980s and eventually became a Senator in 2001 while serving as the president of the Women's Commission. Senator Jaffer has continued to serve the public in numerous capacities while continue to practice law at her practice in Vancouver.

This oral history was conducted at Senator Jaffer's office in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Shezan Muhammedi: "This is an oral history being done on July thirteenth."

Senator Mobina Jaffer: "So I was born in Uganda in Kampala. I was born on the twentieth of August 1949. And my mother was Gulbanu Rajan she was born in Nairobi, my dad Sherali Bandali Jaffer was born in Kampala... actually I think he was born in Bombo. Then I myself was born Nsambya Hospital in Kampala, Uganda and I am the first born of six children, so we are five daughters and one son. I was born into a very well-to-do family, but my family was very rich, and my mother didn't work at that time but my mother is the first woman to have ever gone as university in East Africa and so she was very educated. My dad very much encouraged that so throughout our lives our dad raised us, and my mom went to all kinds of institutions to study.

So for example when we were growing up she went to London, England to study and further her education. What she was is a mathematics teacher, and then later on – and I'll explain that – a social worker, and as a social worker she got sent to London, England and she also got sent to Kent University. And in fact she was at Kent University almost on the steps when the rioting was happening at Kent University. So my mother was very educated and in fact when she came here she's the only person I know who didn't have to go to school at all, she got her accreditation without doing any exams or anything. She just had to do an application at UBC [University of British Columbia] for social work, and they accepted her as a social worker here and she turned around to me – and I wasn't accepted – and said, "You need to go to school, I've done my working," and raised my son instead.

So I was the first of six and when we were growing up it was still a colony so I wasn't allowed to go to my neighbourhood kindergarten so my dad built the Aga Khan kindergarten. That's why the kindergarten in Uganda was built, because I wasn't allowed to go. My dad is sort of... it was Hazar Imam's kindergarten but my dad is the one who established that kindergarten and its... the building is still there. And so instead of going to Nakaziba School which was in our neighbourhood – they wouldn't let me because I was Indian – my dad built the kindergarten. And then I went to all school at Aga Khan, I went to Aga Khan Kindergarten and Aga Khan primary, Aga Khan secondary.

While I was at Aga Khan secondary I got a scholarship. So I spent one year in Takoma, Washington and I stayed with an American family who semi-adopted me so I was close to them, I still am. My so called parents have died as well but my siblings are there and so I have a relationship in the US. So I came my high school years, I spent one year at Clover Park in Takoma and then I went back home and finished my high school and then went to England to do A-levels. And I went to boarding school to do A-levels, then I left that boarding school and finished my A-levels at Norwood College and then got a place at Queen Mary College and London University to do law school. When I finished law school we went home. And when we went home unfortunately..."

Shezan: "You finished in '72?"

Senator Jaffer: "1972 we went home and what happened... in the meantime a lot of things happened... my siblings were born, we were all in a very established family and then my father lost all his money so then my mother went to work. When we were young my mother went to work and my dad also found a job and you know, we were struggling but as children we didn't realize. We didn't have the same house,

we had to move. It was quite a public auction of our stuff so that was quite gut wrenching. Then one of the things I really learned from my mother is she is an amazing woman... she never got attached to things. I still remember that auction and she never worried about things. She had paintings from Italy, she had furniture from Spain and Italy, but it was just things to her. She was so spiritual. And she had the nicest things because my dad loved nice things but neither of them talked about it when they lost it, it was really interesting. They may have talked amongst themselves but they never said to us, "Oh, we lost things," or "Life has come to an end." It just picked up.

Not only did they look after us but my mom and dad financed two siblings... or two nephews in London plus all the ten children of my one uncle and then six children of my other uncle. So I don't know how they managed financially but it was very, very tough. It was extremely tough but my mom got a job, my dad got a job and always we realized that the first share of everything went to my uncle's children and then to us. What that taught us is the sharing and the extended family, so that was very special. Then by the time I went to university my father reestablished himself and so we were okay, we hadn't gained the same wealth but we were fine, we were not struggling. So he paid for me to go to England and paid for my sisters to go to England and I did my law degree at University of London and then returned home.

By this time in '71 I had gotten married against my dad's wishes, because you know he was worried that I wouldn't finish university and he really wanted... I didn't even want to do law actually, I wanted to do political science. And thank god he was paying for my education so I had to listen, so I didn't go into political science but I always told him that the riding that you have or the constituents that you have – I'm going to run after you in that riding in Uganda. But then Idi Amin came and of course they were no longer Members of Parliament.

Then in '71 I returned home, I got married. My husband is from Fort Portal and my husband's father and my father were business partners together, they had a tea plantation together. So the families were very close and we were neighbours. But my dad really didn't want us to get married, tried to bribe me in all kinds of ways, "Do you want a Mercedes? Whatever you want." I didn't want anything and so we got married and I came back to finish and then I finished my last year at law school. My husband and I went back, my husband had already finished his accounting before going back to Uganda. My husband is an accountant and his name is Noorali Jeraj. I haven't taken his name, my name is still Jaffer, my husband is Jeraj, Noorali.

So we came back and unfortunately what had happened in the meantime my father had to flee and when my father fled we thought we had lost him because Idi Amin's men came to get him and he fled. We had a real nightmare because we thought we had lost our dad. Happily for us our mother was in England at that time, she had come for a surgery of one of my sisters. An eye surgery, my sister was in London so she happened to be in London just for this, otherwise I don't know what would have happened. But I had two sisters left behind, younger, and my dad couldn't take them and they were with my aunt. I returned with my husband and my dad had fled, he was in London by then. I returned with my husband and my brother in law, my husband's brother was getting married and my parents wanted me to get my sisters out. It wasn't a big deal, at that time it wasn't so difficult.

After we got them out and then August fifth the day of my brother in law's wedding Idi Amin made this announcement. You know, we all laughed... we didn't take it seriously. We were at the wedding in the evening and we all laughed, "Ha ha ha, he wants us out, what next? Ha ha." Honestly we were laughing, truthfully. My family had had a close call with my dad but we were laughing. This is '72, August fifth, I still remember. Then when we were coming back... the wedding was in Jinja and we were coming back returning to Kampala and then back to Fort Portal, we saw all these cars, Mercedes after Mercedes leaving and we were wondering what was going on. So many Indians were... I guess people were just packing their stuff, their money, their gold, they were leaving. We didn't have that fortitude or that vision because we didn't take it seriously, we really didn't take it seriously. And so we just went our merry way, we went to Kampala and then went to Fort Portal really not worrying about it. For a few weeks we didn't take it seriously you know, the first two, three weeks I don't think we took it seriously.

And then we realized that we have to go, and his family made the decision since my husband and I... we... my husband because of his father had British rights, and so I could get British rights, I didn't, I was Ugandan. So he and I, it was decided that we go to Britain and then his parents would follow us and we would look after his parents and two siblings, and the rest of the siblings we did not know what was going to happen so we left. On the way of leaving... before we left the army picked up my husband which wasn't a very pleasant experience, we suffered a lot. But happily because of my father and those with influence they didn't take him to the army barracks because just the day before we lost one Ismaili and we never heard from him again, from Fort Portal. And if they had taken him to the army barracks... I know I would have never seen him again.

So thankfully they took him to the police station because this police officer had been educated by my father and absolutely insisted that they go to the police station. It wasn't pleasant, it was very unpleasant what happened there but still he did come home and then we left right away and on the way it wasn't pleasant, there were many stops and it was difficult but we made it to Kampala. And also we had a ticket and went off to the airport, that was not pleasant... anyways we made it out and we made it to London.

Then in England my dad took this oath to himself that he would not settle his family until every Indian family, Ismaili family, had settled. So for two years he went from camp to camp, he even went to India and brought the people back either to Canada or England, or elsewhere settled people. So for two years we stayed in London and then in 1974 my father came here, and we came here in '75 to Canada."

Shezan: "So when you guys first got to London, I guess for the fourth or fifth time at this point, what were you guys doing during those two years?"

Senator Jaffer: "So '72... we had already bought a house in London. We had a house so I then went back to school and did my solicitor's exams and I was also working, and so was my husband. He had a very good job because he was already a qualified accountant and we were supporting his family. And you know in London you don't make a lot of money, it doesn't matter how well... things are different. But we managed, we were fine. And my father bought a place just opposite in London and he bought that immediately after he had arrived because he knew we could never go back to Uganda while Idi Amin was there. So he bought this house and then he worked for two years in the camps. My husband and I

worked and I finished all my exams and then when he had settled and done all his work there he came with the whole family except for me to Canada, and then we were sponsored to Canada.

Then we came... I by then had a child in '73 in England, yes. I had a child and my mom looked after it from baby... because I was still going to school, I had to finish my work but also study and finish my... I was doing solicitor's, which was at that time... it was very sad. I wanted to be an advocate, but I was told by everybody, I used to go to Greys Inn, but everybody said to me, "There is no way any solicitor is going to give you, a South Asian woman, work." Because the system in England, in order to go to court a solicitor has to retain you, not a client. So they said, "There's no way." Now things have changed, now it's very different. I'm talking about forty five years ago.

So I was very heartbroken, the system in England was to become an advocate to do dinners at the university and it cost be a fortune, it cost me a lot of money but I did these dinners at Grey's Inn. All I had to do was write the exam and I would have become an advocate, a barrister of England. But everybody told me, "No, no, no, it's not a wise thing to do." So I restarted and became a solicitor in England. And then I came here and the story started again, that was devastating coming here. Coming here was not a pleasant experience because first of all, as you know to come here to get any kind of job you need Canadian experience, which is for me... what is Canadian experience? I mean if you're a lawyer or a secretary or whatever, you have experience. So it was tough to get a job. But the more devastating thing for me was they wouldn't accept my qualifications. So for me, leaving a country by that time sort of had faded because I desperately wanted to be a lawyer and I wasn't going to compromise it, everyone kept saying to me, "In Canada it's impossible to become a lawyer." And a lot of people said to me, "We can't do it, how are you going to do it?" But I'm a very stubborn person and so I decided... I desperately needed a job.

In the meantime I'd become very sick and I'd been hospitalized, I had almost four or five months in the hospital before I could have my son, and afterwards I was very sick. I had **deep vein thrombosis** and there was a risk if any of my blood clots went in to my lungs that would be the end of it. So I had a lot of medical issues in England and then lots here. So when I came here I practically went to every hospital here as well.

So that was a challenge but I was determined so I got a job as a... the law society wouldn't look at my application, they said, "Forget it, we're not going to qualify you." And I couldn't get a job so I went to the telephone directory and I called this man Tom Dohm and he was intrigued because he had been a judge and nobody had called him for a job in years, and he was intrigued that I would call him. So I went and had an interview and I got a job as a girl Friday. So I worked as his girl Friday and the first day on the job he asked me why I was as a lawyer working for this. And I said, "The law society won't look at my application." And he said, "What?" and he said, "You fill out the application." I said, "They won't even give me the forms." He says, "You're joking right?" I said, "No, it's not a joking matter." I actually became quite weepy. And so he just dropped everything and walked to the law society and got the forms, came back and said, "You fill them out, tomorrow morning I'm taking them back." He took them back and in ten days I got my qualifications... I mean I didn't get my qualifications, that's an exaggeration but they at least looked at my application and said I had to do exams. I didn't have to go to university, I had to do exams. At that time they were called common law exams.

I mean in ten days this miracle happened and I worked for... his name is d-o-h-m, Thomas Dohm, The Honorable Thomas Dohm, he used to be a Supreme Court justice. And I worked with him throughout until he died. So he was my law partner and he was working here until he died, or a few years before he died. And so we were together all those years, and he gave me so many breaks, everything I am is because of my parents and him and my husband. They were all very supportive but he was... my parents of course, they loved me, and my husband of course. But this man... not just me, Azool also. Azool also, my son also interned with him, articled with him. So we both articled with him. So then he went and got... I had to do common law exams. So I worked and did common law exams which are very difficult but happily I got through. The other part of that is you have to be a citizen to be a lawyer, it doesn't exist now but at that time it did.

So there was another year, two years of waiting. I mean people used to tease me and I would article, luckily the law society let me article which means you can go to court and do some things. So I articled for two years, at that time it was six months and I articled for two years. It killed me because articling is not fun. But I had already articled for two years in England to become a solicitor, so I was articling forever. I was articling forever and it drove me crazy.

Anyways, in 1978 I became a lawyer and I was the first Indian lawyer in Canada, South Asian woman lawyer. First South Asian woman lawyer – there were men – first practicing woman lawyer in Canada. That was '78 and then I worked with him and I was working as a lawyer quite hard and I had all these cases where I would win and then I would lose the client. The worst cases were where the client would get murdered, maimed, wounded. So then I realized just doing law wasn't enough, you also had to change cultural practices. So with other women... I've done nothing on my own, but with other women we founded the Immigrant and Visible Minority Women organization in B.C. and then founded it nationally. And the three things we work on is ESL [English as a Second Language] for immigrant women, racism, and violence against women. For years and years I've worked with this and I've worked with many other groups – I can give you my CV, that will give you the details – I belong to many, many groups I forget now, but there are many, many groups I belong to. Because I feel law is very important but to change things you need to work both in law and otherwise.

I was a great supporter of Mr. [Jean] Chretien, I almost took a year off to work on his campaign for leadership, I travelled a lot to work the campaign for him and he became leader [Liberal Party of Canada]. Well, before he became leader in 1990 when he ran, I also ran and became vice president of the B.C. party for the women. In 1993 I ran as a candidate in North Vancouver, I lost and immediately after that Mr. Chretien encouraged me to run for vice president of the party, the Liberal Party of Canada nationally. I had just lost an election and I was very bruised, very hurt. I truthfully ran to win. So I was very, very discouraged from that. My parents... I was so discouraged because the first time it hit me that as an Indian – that mattered in the election. And so after that election my parents took my children and I and my husband to India, because we had never been to India, and you know because of this Indian thing we went to India. It was a really nice experience.

Then when I came back Mr. Chretien said, "Run as national vice president." I didn't want to because losing an election is very bruising. He said, "No, no, run." I was running against someone very well-known and very respected in the party so I was very nervous and I won hands down which was very

encouraging. So I was vice president of the party for almost seven years nationally and then I ran to become president of the Women's Commission for almost seven years as well. And while I was president of the Women's Commission in 2001 Mr. Chretien appointed me to be the Senator for B.C., so that's my story.

But the struggles are... for me, at that time racism was a big issue but in the community people don't like you talking about that. And I always feel like you have to name it to deal with it. So I truthfully believe that you have to name it to believe it and to work on it to change it. I used to get a lot of push back, especially from the Ismaili community about, "Why do you always talk about racism?" Well you know for example when I would go to court and I was a young lawyer, I was never taken as the lawyer. I was always taken as the interpreter of the accused, but never as the lawyer. There were times that the judges would give me such a rough time that Mr. Dohm would come and sit in the court room with me because they just didn't accept.

The struggles that I had as a young lawyer was just so horrendous, I have now forgotten but at that time I had real struggles. Now when I look and see that my young colleagues don't have those struggles I feel good. I had a role to play in breaking barriers because they just did not expect a South Asian woman as a lawyer so there were lots of barriers. I had so many fights but one thing I learned from my father and mother – especially my father, he is a fighter. He will never accept anybody treating... because I had issues like that of colour in Africa of course because you were not white, you were not black. So I had all of those issues and in Canada you don't expect that, and you have them.

So in the process here also my father and my husband bought egg farms, we had issues there. They both had colour issues there because farms had never been owned by Indians before here. So there were lots of colour issues and I think why it was so hard here is because in Africa we expected it. But in Canada we had this idea that everybody was equal, so it was very tough. The fight was very tough. So until I became a Senator I really fought hard on racism issues and violence against women. Now I don't work so much on the race issues except I'm starting to again on the issue of carding, which we can talk about later. But my work in the Senate is all about violence against women around the world. I'm hosting a big conference with the help of Norway on the issue of extremism and violence in August. So in the Senate since I got there... it's so funny, I got appointed in July and I was sworn in a week after 9/11. So I'm the first Muslim Senator, the first Senator of African origin, the first South Asian woman Senator, and all after 9/11. So that was... it was interesting. In the Senate I'm the chair of the Human Rights Committee and I still work very hard on terrorism issues. So my work in the Senate is very much about human rights and terrorism."

Shezan: "Why Canada? Your dad decided here instead of..."

Senator Jaffer: "Oh yeah, actually with who he was he could have gone to Australia. The Australian government had approached him and said he could come there because he worked very hard in England and he was part of the immigrant community. There was a committee set up by the British government on settling and he was very prominent on the committee. So staying in England was not... he could have stayed there, he could have gone to Australia, he could have gone to other European countries. He chose Canada because a year or so before he had come here and he was absolutely convinced that

Canada would not be a place where his grandchildren would not get thrown out. He wanted to choose a country where in the future his children would not get thrown out of, that's why he chose Canada. He really made a very specific choice. He didn't get thrown here, he chose Canada."

Shezan: "That would have been in '71 he came?"

Senator Jaffer: "No he came in '74 because he stayed three years settled in England for three years before, so he came in '74."

Shezan: "No sorry, the first time he came to Canada?"

Senator Jaffer: "Oh that would be in 1970's, early 1970."

Shezan: "And he came to Vancouver?"

Senator Jaffer: "Yes, he did. Yeah he had friends here, Zeenat Virani here. He came to visit Zeenat Virani in early 1970 because they were very good friends, he stayed at their house and then decided this is where we're going to stay. Then I had two children, my son is a lawyer with me practicing, and I have a daughter who is a hypnotherapist. And my husband is an accountant, he still works. I have two grandchildren, a nine year old and a two year old. Life is perfect, grandchildren is the reason to live now."

Shezan: "How was raising your children in Canada? Well I guess a bit in London..."

Senator Jaffer: "Yeah, I didn't raise too much, we had in laws and we came here, so he was just born there. Raising children for me, I'm very blessed that my parents helped me raise them. I didn't have the usual issues because every time my child got sick it was so funny, if my son was not well he wouldn't even bother waking us up, he would call my dad. We would hear a bell and say, "What are you doing here?" And he'd say, "Oh, Azool called us, Azool is not feeling well," and they'd come to get him. So I mean I had it... and then later on for my daughter a housekeeper, a nanny. Raising children for me in that way was not difficult and I made the decision that I didn't want to to be arrogant... not the best lawyer in town, because to be the best lawyer in town that's all you do. And so I'm okay with being a mediocre lawyer. I spent a lot of time guiding and sculpting with my children. I was every... I was at my son's beaver leader, cub leader, scout leader, ventura leader, and my daughter's brownie leader. By the time she went to guides I didn't do guides with her. But I was scout leader in North Vancouver, I was very involved in scouts besides other organizations for my children. I was very involved in my children's lives, I still am. Today after here I am going to the aquarium with my grandson, that's why I have to leave."

Shezan: "Oh yeah, no problem."

Senator Jaffer: "That's the part I really love of having grandchildren."

Shezan: "Were you guys always at that place in West Van?"

Senator Jaffer: “We... I don’t like moving a lot, so we bought a place in North Van near Capilano University, and just towards deep cove. So we’ve just moved... we’ve had the two homes in our whole lives, in our forty years.”

Shezan: “Was your dad always in West Van?”

Senator Jaffer: “No, he built that house. So when we came we all lived together in Richmond and then a year later he built a house in West Van and he’s always lived there. He’s left that house... we can’t sell it. So it means that we share everything which is... when he did it to be truthful we were not happy with that because who is going to look after it? Of course we could all do with the money. But it’s the best thing that... my father was very wise because it means that we all still have a family home to go to. So we will do Eid there, how visionary is my dad? Of course we could do Eid at my house, but this is my dad’s home we can all go to, isn’t that lovely? It’s amazing, we are so blessed. We are really, really blessed.”

Shezan: “I guess there was regime change in Uganda when Idi Amin came to power, is that the kind of reasoning why your dad’s business had changed? I think you were telling me that you guys had been doing well and then something happened...”

Senator Jaffer: “Oh yeah, no it was nothing to do with that, a bad business decision but nothing to do with that.”

Shezan: “When your mom started working in that period, was she teaching?”

Senator Jaffer: “No social work.

Shezan: “Oh she was a social worker in Uganda...”

Senator Jaffer: “So I’m sounding a little arrogant – and I’m running out of time, I’m so sorry – is that my when mother became a social worker, she would have to observe hangings, she would have to observe lashings. My mother was such a strong person. And I met the judges recently in Uganda who were judges when my mother was there and they said, “Your mother was so tough.” If an Asian boy was caught – and you know how things were separated there – so she would not let the judge make any decision, she would say, “You let that boy into my custody and I promise you that boy will never come back into the court system.

So I have lots of young, not young anymore... my age or older than me some, say to me, “It was because of your mother I didn’t go to jail.” In fact the other day a classmate I didn’t even know came up to me in the US and said, “I was in jail and your mother got me out,” and he jokes, “I would probably still be in jail. Your mother just walked in, got them to open the cell, she took me and...” she used to bring them home. So my mother was a very... if you saw her she was a very quiet, a very wonderful woman, but she was a tough woman. I mean I can’t imagine today, going into jails here and stuff, imagine going to jails in Africa. But she had a small box with them and she... also she negotiated an agreement with the American government that they gave her powdered milk. So we had a line of people going into our garage every day in the morning to pick up that milk and I know she had one of the people working for us handing out milk.

So all day there'd be a line at the back of the house for milk, and at the front of the house my father was the Member of Parliament. In 1963 he became a Member of Parliament. So front we would have constituency work, at the back for milk. I mean out house we always had many, many people. I don't remember having a meal alone in Uganda, it was always anybody that came to our house. And I don't know because... it's not like my mother cooked big saucepans but the food always stretched. We never went hungry because we had guests. Here you know if somebody comes you go, "Oh my god, how are we going to do it?" But there food always stretched.

My parents always taught us a lot of skills. But one thing, even though we were wealthy and then we lost it and then we were okay... but we never felt we were above anybody. My mother was very tough, they brought us up very, very well. And the last thing my dad said to my husband before he died... and we didn't even know he was that sick, but his last words were, "I don't want any of my children to show off, I don't want that. When I die I don't want you to show off, I want simple, simple."

Even at this age when he could have had anything... don't show off. And what that did is... what he did for us, everything else I've said to you has been very clinical because otherwise I can't function... my dad is still very raw. He was an amazing man, and you know he was a feminist before his time. All five girls went to school, I'm a lawyer, my sister is a pharmacist, I have a sister who's a teacher and does social work, I have a sister who is a nutritionist and I have a sister in Kenya, but she can't work there. So she's the only one who is at home because she is a Canadian so she can't work."

Shezan: "My last question would be, after being so well travelled and being in Canada for such a long time, how would you identify yourself? Would you say you're a Canadian Ugandan, a Ugandan Canadian, an Ismaili Indian Canadian..."

Senator Jaffer: "Well I identify myself both African and Indian. I don't identify myself. I would say generally that... it's very complicated but I would say that I've been in Canada longer than anywhere else, but I am of African and Indian origin and practice the Muslim faith."

Shezan: "Well thank you so much for your time. That was absolutely perfect."

Senator Jaffer: "Are you sure?"

Shezan: "Yes."

Senator Jaffer: "If you have any questions after, please ask."

Shezan: "I'll definitely be in touch."

[End of transcript].