

The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project

An Oral History with Vasant and Sudha Lakhani

Archives and Research Collections

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Narrator: Vasant and Sudha Lakhani

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Abstract:

Vasant Lakhani was born in Jinja but spend his childhood growing up in Kamuli and Iganga. He moved to Kampala for secondary school before studying abroad in India. He returned to Uganda and work for the British American Tobacco company up until the expulsion was announced. Sudha was originally born in India but moved to Uganda after she married Vasant.

Vasant, Sudha, and their two children were admitted to Canada in September of 1972 and were initially resettled in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Vasant worked several odd jobs while his wife looked after the two children and took courses at night at a local community college. They eventually opened their own corner store in the 1970s.

After several years Vasant joined the Ontario government as an accountant and Sudha also joining in 1992. They remained civil servants until they retired in 2002. After retirement, Vasant and Sudha began their vigorous charity which continues to this day.

The interview was conducted at Vasant and Sudha's home in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Shezan: “This is an oral history being done on July 13th, and yeah I’ll let you guys start with growing up in Uganda.”

Vasant: “So when we grew up what happened is I was born in Jinja but I lived in a town called Kamuli and then I lived in Iganga and then I went over for high school, secondary school in Kampala. From there I went to India for my education, diploma in India and then I came back and worked in Kitale, but in those days you needed a permit to work in Kenya because I was from Uganda. We didn’t have permits so I had to come back to Uganda for eighteen months or so, so I got a job with Jinja Municipal Council. So I worked there and that’s when I met her in Jinja and then there was no advancement for me with the Jinja Municipal Council so I joined... I had an offer from BAT, British American Tobacco. So I moved to a town called Tororo, I got married and our son when we moved to Tororo was about six, eight months old. And then in 1969 we moved to Tororo... in 1966 or something, ’69, ’70 we moved back to Kampala because my company transferred me to Kampala and I didn’t like the big city and all that.

Meanwhile I was looking for a better opportunity and I had joined the Excite group of companies, they were putting a battery factory there so I became a manager there and we built a battery factory right from the ground, put it into production. When it came into production my employers sent me to UK, Germany, Sweden, just to see the other battery factories operate. It was all three parts of Europe came together and we had Bosch from Germany, Varta or something like that from Sweden. So we manufactured the batteries, so when I came back in the end of... was it the end of July?

Sudha: “The first week of August we came back from London.”

Vasant: “So as soon as I came [Idi] Amin declared that all Asians leave. So my employers say that if you go to India you will have employment there or something like that. She didn’t want to go to India... I was ready to go as a matter of fact. Then we went to see the India High Commission because I knew him and he said it’s a tough life in India, if you get some other place fair enough, if not we are going to lift you up anyways at the end. So then when I came Idi Amin also has the condition that if you claim to be a Ugandan citizen you need to get a Ugandan passport, with six month’s UK visa in my passport. Amin had said that those who claim to be Uganda citizens should go and verify their documents. So there were lines and lines of people at immigration, I went for verification and the officer said, “Well you are not a citizen.” So I took out my birth certificate or my passport... I said, “Here is my passport. He said, “You are not a citizen.” So now he took my passport and chucked it with the others so I became stateless. I still had my birth certificate so he stamped my birth certificate.

So now I have no document to travel and when I came back after I had jaundice, you know so now my doctor said I can't come down. The Amin expulsion order was already there and we had to leave. So I couldn't go out, but she went to the British High Commission and the Canadians had opened up their office and Australia and all that, Australia, USA. So she went there got the forms, fill in the forms. And then we got the okay to leave Uganda, so they said, "When can you leave?" We said, "Tomorrow." The next day Canada said, "When do you want to leave?" "Tomorrow." So they said, "Okay we'll book you because we have a convoy of busses going and you'll get in the bus so you don't get stopped by military officers" or something like that.

So here we came to the airport on the bus and what we did that night... we didn't want to stay home because when people know we are leaving and all that they might take us at night. So we were afraid so we went and stayed in the hotel where the Canadian officials were staying, the Apollo Hotel. We stayed there overnight and in the morning at seven o'clock we went with the convoy and we travelled to come to Canada. So we were housed for a couple of days, a couple nights in Longue Pointe. We went to... then they were calling us, each refugee was called to see their qualifications and all that and see what you want to do with your life in Canada.

So when we were called we were asked where you want to go, so we said, "Well, a few names we learned was Toronto and Montreal." We had never heard of Thunder Bay, now Thunder Bay was the twin city of Fort William and Port Arthur and what happened is in 1971 it amalgamated and became Thunder Bay. So Thunder Bay was just a new city, so this guy said, "Why don't you go to Thunder Bay?" "Where's Thunder Bay? Show me on the map." It's up North and old anyways and I said, "How about food and shelter?" He said, "Oh, we'll look after you," and they said, "We'll set up a salon and we will train you." Now we had two little ones, I had my son who was about seven and the other was about one and a half or eighteen months. So they said, "It takes about three or four days to get to Thunder Bay from Montreal." So they said how about to fly? If you set up a loan we'll pay you. So they flew us to Thunder Bay, we came to Toronto and had a break there so the officials came and showed us what's the next flight and all that, so we came to Thunder Bay.

In Thunder Bay I worked first... they were giving us twenty five dollars and ninety five cents a week from the immigration centre. It was enough money, things were tight but we could make it. Then we wanted to work, we didn't want free money so we asked them to give us some jobs so they gave us, myself and a friend who was with me from Uganda he gave us a job twenty eight kilometers west of Thunder Bay

digging the roads. So we became flagmen on the roads, so I did that for about two or three weeks and then my jaundice came back. The doctor advised me not to do any labour work, so I came back.

So I could leave the job, the job was standing eight to ten hours not sit for ten hours in a chair, it was tough. Ten hours steady you know, and those guys worked until they can't see, it's not like eight hours, it could be ten hours, it could be eleven hours. You start at six o'clock, seven o'clock, go in the truck for twenty eight kilometers, thirty kilometers. They'd drop us there and give us the gear and all that. We worked there and then when they come back I was looking and then I found a job with a law firm. The five or six lawyers would come together and they wanted to balance their trust account and everything else so I did accounting with them. I worked about a year or so there but they really took care of us, they gave us ... then meanwhile we were in a hotel, we were accommodated at the hotel and then from there we were put us in low cost housing which was a hundred and fifty dollars or something a month. Now they employment centre would pay that directly to the lender.

So then I got a job with the law firm, so I worked there for a couple of years and I advanced into a... from distributing products to this company as an accountant. They were extracting starch from wheat flour, so they would process the wheat flour and take the starch out and the starch is supplied to a paper mill. It's a wet starch used to make paper, there are paper mills around Thunder Bay, there are around six or seven of them. So I worked there and then meanwhile while I was... she couldn't find employment because we had two little ones and..."

Sudha: "No Canadian experience."

Vasant: "We faced the same thing, no Canadian experience. But I was just lucky to get into the law firm, they were looking for somebody but I worked about fourteen hours a day keeping everything up to date. So with Canadian experience we found a corner store, so she ran the corner store and I came from work and looked after the business after five and she looked after the kids. Meanwhile she did some courses community college there to continue her school at night. So what happened after that... we did better with the store rather than me working so I became full time. I quit the thing and then we started and opened up another store. And then I was really tired because we opened at eight and closed at twelve. So eventually we both got into a government job. I joined the Ontario government in 1988, or 1987 I joined the Ontario public service and I worked there."

Sudha: "I got a job in '91."

Vasant: "'91, yeah. '91 so she got a job with the Ontario registrar general when they opened a new office there, births and deaths, so she worked there. And in 2001 I had the opportunity of... meanwhile my son got married and they were saying, "Why do you want to work now? Come and stay with us here," and all that. And eventually they convinced me to retire at the age of sixty two, but the issue was if I come here, she can't come here. So she had to resign her job to join me, so the government at that time offered us a package. Offered me a package, and she had to resign for unemployment and we moved to Vancouver. After coming to Vancouver I worked with a number of non-profit organizations locally but I wanted to go do something outside.

So when Katrina came in the USA, I think it was in 2002, 2003, something like that. When Katrina came my friend said, "Oh, let's go help because people are suffering, why don't you find out, you've got a lot of connections." So I looked for a friend of mine, he is a doctor in South Carolina and he put me in contact with an organization called Association of Indian Professionals of Northern Ohio. They were going to... the tsunami happened at that time in South India and when I phoned they said they'd already been to help in the USA with the hurricane and now they were going to go... it was around December they were going to go help out with the tsunami. So I said, "Okay," it was just a year after the tsunami so I said, "Okay, I'll join you." So I joined them and then I worked with them in South India for two weeks. The first week... well I read a sign there, it was in an Ashram it said, I read a sign saying what job you want to do. So there will be some postings there, so one posting that interested me, it was working building tsunami homes. I put it on the desk and said, "I will try this." So they said, "Come at seven on the dot." So I went at seven a.m. on the dot and whatever job was there was to do bricks and sand from the mainland to the island."

[Interruption]

Vasant: "Disaster area, so we load a boat and have a human chain. Once you are in you can't come out because once you are out the brick will fall on somebody's toes. So we haul brick all day from eight o'clock, we have our lunch break there and food is brought to us. We have our lunch there at the site and we start again around four, five o'clock because it was too hot. At that time there was a team of United Nations, there were people from Finland, Australia, all kinds of things you know. So I met quite a few people there and then I did that for five days. Then I did some sand and then they said, "Now we don't need any stuff there," because they could build it. Now I came back to the group of doctors and said, "Now I am back, I need to work with you." They said, "Okay, don't worry, work with the doctor

and do what she says. So they made me sit with the pediatrician and she would say, "Give them thirty Tylenol, fifteen cipro." They are all written down so I just... so that was my job, I started with that.

Then we had the language problem, because they didn't speak English and we didn't speak their language, Konkani or something, you know. So they told me, I said "I'm going to Gujarat after this." They said, "Why don't you go to the west coast of India," where I come from. "Go to Gujarat and find something." I said, "Don't worry, I'll find something." So I came to Gujarat and I stayed in an ashram and I told the administrator in the town called Jamnagar, "We would like to help if you could just provide us food and shelter, food and lodging type things, we'll give medicine to whoever comes." They were excited, they said, "Okay." So I phoned the Indian Professionals of Northern Ohio, I said, "I have a site ready for you, so confirm." So they confirmed that the following year they will do it after, and I think that was 2006 or something.

So we saw over six thousand patients there. The process was that every morning we'd go in the village and it's advertised that patients would come, we'd treat them and if they need extra or something brought to town, it's done and then they go back. We had dentists, we had pediatricians, we had general practitioners, all this stuff. So that was finished we were sitting and a couple of doctors from that group, they were from Uganda. They said, "You organized so well, why don't you do something in Uganda?" I said, "I have no connection right now." They said, "Don't worry, I'll see what I can do." I came to London and I was visiting my sister's husband and I said, "I don't know, these guys are telling me to go to Uganda and set up a camp. Do you know anybody?" He said, "Don't worry, I will make a few phone calls." So we made a couple of calls and we found a sponsor.

So the following year, I think it was 2007 we planned a camp in Uganda. So that camp was about seven thousand patients, we had about six local doctors. Prior to the camp I flew to Uganda, the camp was in August but in May I was in the UK for personal reasons and from there I went to Uganda. So I went to Uganda and went to Jinja, I met the Super intendant of this camp in Jinja and said, "I'm doing this camp, I might not have enough doctors and we don't know what it would be like, I may have five, six doctors only. So they said, "Yeah okay, no problem. I'll give you six doctors." They gave me six intern doctors.

So then in August we flew into the camp and saw seven thousand patients. So the following year Indian professionals said their board is a little bit scared, frightened of Uganda because that time an Indian worker was killed. He was at the wrong place at the wrong time and Mehta Group in Mabira Forest growing their sugar cane and figured, sugar... so there was some disagreement and all that. So they

hated Asians for a while there and I think the people took advantage of it for this young man. So they got framed, and then it came on my lap. So I said, "Okay I will book the camp for the second year, I'm going to continue."

So I didn't have doctors, I had no money. So I flew to London and I put a big ad in our Gujarati paper, five hundred dollars. So through there I got a few doctors, I got some money. The good part of that I had to... there was a woman that read my ad, Mrs. Soda she was a counselor with Borough of Barnet [region of North London, UK]. And she sent me an email that we are a twin city with Jinja and if you do something for us I will give you some money. If you organize something we will give you some money to use in the camp. So said and done they gave me a letter to take it to the mayor, the twin city in Jinja, called the mayor for the opening ceremony and all that, you know. Then all that happened and then they gave me three thousand pounds and the way our program worked was whoever joins us will give us a hundred and fifty dollars for their board and lodging or whatever, but the sponsors are sponsoring us, we didn't have enough money. So that way we built about six or seven thousand dollars. So saving that we did the second camp with fourteen thousand patients, then we do the third and this continues. Meanwhile we continue with India, but India we expanded our services with water boards we do rivers osmosis, filtration camp, we do clothing, links to seniors a lot of other things. In Uganda I don't have a good base established.

So in 2012 we went to Uganda, Ebola came and we were already on the ground. Camp was supposed to start in five days so we decided to close the camp. We had a meeting with the hospital officials Kampala Hospital officials because I was sponsored and the decision was made that we will cancel the camp because Ebola virus was in Mbarara, western Uganda. So we closed the camp and then that camp was cancelled then last year we had a camp in Tororo. In Tororo where I am trying to build a vocational centre right now, working on it. I told them we already have the money, cost them around fifteen thousand dollars. The reason being I was told that there was an orphanage in South Africa there and we visited them and we also had incidental cleaning there. So we visited South Africa and about three or four hundred children from two days, three days until about fifteen year olds. What happened is some parents throw their children in a dump or something or if the police hear about this they'll go and pick it up and bring the kid up, become their parents, you know. So those kids are out there with no parents. So I asked what I can do for him and he said, "You can build us a shed so I can have a vocational centre." Some of these kids finished high school or even primary school. They are twelve, thirteen, fourteen, high school is fifteen, seventeen, eighteen year olds. After finishing the school they don't have

enough money to go to further studies like university or college or something like that and what happens is they have nothing to do. Can't find anything so they get into mischief.

So the best thing we can do is build a shed, provide some kind of training or some kind of carpentry or something, mechanics, the girls can learn sewing or computer skills. And for him that centre... probably they will surely get employed after they are finished their year or two years, whatever it is. That way they will not only not get into the mischief but support themselves and their families. So I bought into that idea and said, "Look, I'll give you fifteen thousand dollars over a period of three years. But I don't think it will take three years, probably maybe eighteen months to build it. I'll already give half the money set aside for that and I am going there, I am leaving on the sixth of July, I'm going to visit him and see if he can work it out that foundation is done in time and we will complete it next year when we go there, so we'll see how it goes. So these are some of the projects I am involved in after retiring from the government, and she can tell you about her stuff."

Shezan: "Yeah, sure. I'm curious now, so your family decided... do you know why your family decided to move to Uganda from India?"

Sudha: "Well he had a job there, but he had a job in the court because he was qualified as a lawyer and then his opportunities would be better if he moved to Uganda. There were better opportunities than India."

Shezan: "So you were pretty much raised in Uganda?"

Sudha: "That's right, yeah."

Shezan: "In Jinja as well? So you went to school and everything as well?"

Sudha: "Yeah. I got my grade twelve and got married and then I had two little kids and did some courses too."

Shezan: "And then, how about your siblings? Do you guys have brothers or sisters?"

Sudha: "Yeah, they are all in England. They had British passports."

Vasant: "See what happened is they all have English passports. I had a Ugandan passport and my Ugandan passport was seized. I had a visa to go to UK... UK had restrictions that Uganda cannot go at that time so you need a visa or something. Now I don't have a passport, I have no document to travel, she had her British passport but she wouldn't go without me and if I am left behind I don't know what

would happen. So I think it was the right time for us to perhaps leave because I think when they don't recognize the documents themselves that the government issued, you could see what kind of ruling they would have. And after we left we heard a lot of people have been killed.

One example I'd like to say here is I was working with the battery factory, what happened is – I didn't tell you – I worked in Kitale and I worked in Jinja for the Municipal Council, then BAT Tobacco and finally joined Excite. So when I was working for Excite there was a... my son had a problem with vision, in those days his eyes would turn red, he'd sneeze and be watery and all that, my older son. So we were really worried about it, so we saved and said should we go to Nairobi? Saw the doctor and nothing worked, this or that and then the time I went to Lion's club I went to Dr. Ameru, everyone said, "Oh, go to Dr. Ameru" We were going for three months, two, three months for appointments. He was a tribesman who worked for Obote, worked for Obote but was a very nice man.

I met him at the Lion's club and said, "Look, my son has this problem and everybody says... but I don't want to wait for three months, I'm hoping we can get the treatment done." He said, "No, no," gave me his card and said, "Phone me, tell the secretary that I asked to see you." So we got an appointment to go see him. After seeing him we gave him some ointment and it worked so then I kept working and after six or eight months he phones me and says, "My nephew James has finished technical school and is looking for employment, would you hire him?" I said, "Yeah, send him and I'll hire him at the battery factory." He's got technical knowledge, you know, so I hired James.

James came to work every day regularly and one day he doesn't show up. So I went for my rounds and said, "Where's James today?" They said he didn't come, so I thought maybe he's ill or something. And then he came after a couple of days, three days and I asked James, "Where were you?" He said, "You know my uncle? He got killed." The only reason... Amin was threatened that he was Obote tribe, who Amin had toppled. A highly educated person. So he was killed and that is an incident we remember for life."

Shezan: "Yeah that's very scary."

Vasant: "Amin killed a lot of good doctors, lawyers... if he had attacked to take over this or that. So it was a scary situation and a good thing that happened was... we are happy here but the average Ugandan suffered for a lot after we left. When we go now we hear the stories. They had no food, the factories closed..."

Shezan: "The economy collapsed significantly."

Vasant: "And now they seem to like us when we go there now... so it's a different story."

Shezan: "So what made you guys apply to Canada?"

Vasant: "We had no choice."

Sudha: "Yeah I tried even US embassy, Canadian embassy, British embassy and all that. The first interview came from the Canadian government and the second interview from the US was the week after we left. So we didn't want to wait, we just wanted to leave right away. And Canada is a good country to begin, so we just left."

Shezan: "And they didn't give you guys a hard time or anything with that?"

Sudha: "No, no. They were very nice. He had jaundice and I was afraid that he might fail his medical but the doctor there assured me, don't worry about it. I talked to the doctor there, it was a Sikh guy from Canada, he came with the Canadian embassy."

Vasant: "He was a young doctor."

Sudha: "He says not to worry about it, so it was nice."

Shezan: "So how was your first winter?"

Sudha: "Oh it was tough, very tough. The kids loved it because they saw snow for the first time so they liked to..."

Vasant: "We were in a hotel and the hotel was in a ski area, Thunder Bay has a big ski resort, you know. So the hotel woman said, "It's the thirty first or first of November" and the kids would look in the window, oh no snow."

Sudha: "So when the snow fell they wanted to play outside, for them it was okay."

Vasant: "Now thinking back... how did we live in that minus thirty, twenty five. A little bit of cold here and it's like cold."

Shezan: "And then I guess... getting Indian groceries must have been difficult in Thunder Bay, right?"

Sudha: "Yes. We used to buy turmeric powder in the little bottles."

Vasant: "And then in our own store we carried Indian groceries, in the corner store one aisle was Indian stuff."

Sudha: "We used to order from Toronto, before we had the store."

Vasant: "If somebody goes to Toronto we'd say, "Bring this for us.""

Shezan: "There was a small refugee community in Thunder Bay?"

Vasant: "See what happened was when we were there, there was about eighteen or twenty refugees, eighteen families. And then what happened was eventually they phase out one by one, somebody moved to Vancouver, Toronto."

Sudha: "So many Ismaili families."

Vasant: "Hindu families were four or five."

Sudha: "Just four."

Vasant: "Four Hindus and the rest were Ismailis. About twelve, fourteen Ismailis and four of us. But there was nothing in those days, we got together Sunday mornings and had our breakfast together, everybody came. It was a totally different feeling, I think that time the dollar wasn't the issue. Today the dollar becomes a big issue now, everybody is chasing the dollars. We were just having a good time, we didn't have money anyways. Nobody had it so everybody was at the same level, you know?"

Sudha: "Things were cheaper, too."

Vasant: "We would go and buy expiry date bread from thrifty stores, four for a buck."

Sudha: "Even Allen's apple juice, four cans for a dollar, twenty five cents each."

Vasant: "You would look for a sale item and buy it, you know."

Sudha: "Even our bus fare was only ten cents."

[Interruption]

Vasant: "I was involved in volunteer work, involved in the Lion's club and then after ten, fifteen years I was chair of the multicultural folklore festival and then I helped Vietnam refugees at the time they came. I sponsored families after families, then I sponsored a Sudanese family, and then Ugandan families came from Sudan, then the last – before I moved here – I had... I forget the name, about sixty families in 2001, Croatians... not Croatians..."

Shezan: "Serbian?"

Vasant: "Serbian, yeah. One of the boys is still on my Facebook. I said, "Do you remember?" He said, "Oh Mr. Lakhani, how could I forget you." So I sponsored that family, I sponsored sixty, seventy families. That system was good, I need ten names, you know. And then a couple of them signed, we found curtains, a microwave, a cooker, an ironing board, you know equip them completely, tried to find them employment. But Thunder Bay is very hard pressed to find jobs, so they stayed there for a year. So that's what it was... what was I talking about?"

Shezan: "The families coming to Thunder Bay."

Vasant: "Yeah, see they will come and there's a program like second language and the community could get their education learning and they will move. Toronto is easier because they have jobs. Here even if you give them the money, most people don't want free money, they want to work. Like us, we were getting the money, we could have just stayed home and done nothing but we went and became this and that... myself and my friend. So refugees came to Thunder Bay, very few stayed though because employment was hard to find. So they would get their skills and speaking the language, learn a bit of skills and then they'll move to Toronto. All the refugees that came from Somalia... what were the last wave of refugees?"

Sudha: "Kosovo"

Vasant: "Kosovo refugees came, that was my last assignment at that community. But that was... the father of the church got me involved and said, "Why don't you sign this document?" I said, "Well I can do this too, I can go to my friend and you take joint responsibility." But let me say one thing, those who have come have never cost me a penny. Maybe we've got them food or supplied some groceries but not heavy duty, thousands of dollars. Out of good heart, we bought groceries for them or put curtains for them, but I'd ask someone and say, "A new family is coming, can you give me the money?" Personally we would take them every Saturday morning and take them for groceries, if there was a sale, take them to the sale so it's cheaper for them and their dollars would last longer. But no one has come and stayed home and sucked us... not a single family like that. We had a Sri Lankan boy come, quite a few, we sponsored Vietnamese refugees, ten in the family."

Sudha: "He tried to commit suicide before he came because he was sending him back to Sri Lanka and he was Tamil..."

Vasant: "He was in an Austrian camp... so we sponsored him."

Sudha: "That was good, he got a life here."

Vasant: "So we did a lot of volunteer work with refugees and in northwestern Ontario we started a festival in Fort Francis, motivating the community to hold a festival. So we had multicultural associations. See the number of refugees in Fort Francis were three, but still they needed some help for people that come in, or in Kenora it would be a few. So I think that's our life In Thunder Bay, here it's totally different now. As I said earlier our parents came from India and that's our roots, so we go to India and do the camp and help out, then we go to Uganda because we were born there, brought up there, you know. So we did a bit of work there. Here in Canada we lived here and made our money here, brought up our families here. And we flew here between..."

[Interruption]

Shezan: "How was raising your kids in Canada?"

Vasant: "I think in the beginning it was tough because my oldest son, as soon as he saw a uniformed person he would hide away. What happened when Amin took over in '71, what happened is we lived downtown and I was working for Excite group company and he was seven then and my wife was expecting the second one. Six or seven years old and my wife was expecting a second one that was almost due. So what happened is this army personnel came and knocked the door, curfew time was after six o'clock nobody could go out. So they came and knocked on the door and I opened the door and this man with an AK47 was there and then the other three came in and went to her, so my son went to hide under the bed. So then he came out after with his mom and he saw everything that they did to us, they robbed us so I took my wallet out and gave them the money, "This is expensive, take that" he put me against the wall and said I'm going to shoot you. Finally we said, you know what? There was a Walifax camera in those days that was very popular and very expensive, gave him watches and whatever we had.

The problem was if they take it how are they going to split it? They wanted cash only, so they don't have a dispute. All they wanted is cash, they didn't want any other materials, if they had taken our stuff they probably would have gotten more money. Finally I said you know what, he had six or seven hundred dollars in the cupboard because he was expecting so he might need the money because they are not credit cards... so I told her to give that money, so we gave whatever money and now we say we don't... he said he was going to shoot me. I said, "One thing I can do is I can give you a one thousand dollar

cheque with the boxes back, you can go and cash it tomorrow. Or if you want I can come tomorrow and give you the thousand cheques.”

So now I realized... now today I think they were going to shoot... but that will make a noise, and then the whole thing will make a commotion, right? So that’s what we realize now but in those days we don’t think that way, you know. So then when I said that they realized we don’t have any money, so he came to me and hold my hand here and pushed me in the front down in the back of the door. I opened the door and he said, “Ask the next door neighbour to open it,” so I knocked and the guy thought the curfew was going... maybe I needed milk for the kid or something. So as soon as he opened the door they pushed me into my house and went in. So one by one they robbed every house.

Meanwhile what happens? We went to sleep and the next day too, I think it’s the twenty sixth... Rohin was born on the twenty seventh wasn’t he? Yeah in a day or two she did give birth. Unexpected, it was almost due but there was still some time. So we had to run to the hospital because you can’t go after six. So our second son was born at that time, twenty seventh of January, 1971. So this is why, what happens is that when my son sees a uniformed person he goes and hides.”

Sudha: “Even I after coming here, that’s why... they put us in the military camp in Montreal when we landed and they were trying to be friendly with our kids because the kids were scared of military.”

Vasant: “Even after coming to Thunder Bay he did not like to see policeman with a uniform, he was just so scared. So this... what happened is now he is okay but in those days we didn’t realize this is trauma. Today if a refugee comes they do all that for the kids. In those days it wasn’t like that.”

Shezan: “My last question is a little bit... it’s a tough one to answer. I guess after all of your life experiences, how would you guys sort of identify yourselves? Would you say you’re Canadian Ugandans or Canadian Indians, Ugandan Indians?”

Vasant: “Now we are saying that we are Canadians because for the last forty two years, close to forty three years. But people seeing us will recognize we are Indian, people will not realize that we are Ugandans. But we feel that we have to give back to Uganda because we grew up there, our family brought us up, our son was born there, I was born there, we still have some feelings.”

Shezan: “What does it meant to be a Canadian to you guys?”

Sudha: “Great, because of our health system and everything.”

Vasant: "Identifying as Canadian, the systems we have here, your medical coverage, your life in general is much better than it would have been in Uganda."

Sudha: "Life is tough in Uganda right now, very tough. So expensive, everything and people don't have that much money. They can only afford one meal a day, the maid and those people they can't afford two meals a day."

Vasant: "Because when we go we talk to them, we talk to the housemaids about how much they make and the school fees are so high in Uganda and they want to educate their kids but they won't eat. That's the culture now, the culture of Uganda today is educate your kids. I think I read somewhere, something like eighty percent of people are being educated. So education is the top priority for the average Ugandan there. So life is tough, it's tough for Ugandans. Those who migrated now, new immigrants from India, from Pakistan, from all over, they are perhaps doing a bit better. Also in Uganda today there is now... amongst Ugandans now there is a caste, a small number of them and the vast population is very poor, there is no middle class. India was in the sixties and seventies like that, there was either rich or poor. That's what I see for the last eight years we have been going... those who are poor are very poor, you know. They work but still they can't make ends meet."

Shezan: "It's a very tough cycle to break."

Vasant: "It's a tough cycle, a very tough cycle."

Shezan: "Is there anything that you guys wanted to add at all?"

Vasant: "I think we pretty well covered everything. Every year we go..."

Sudha: "As long as our health keeps up."

Vasant: "Keeps up, yeah. As time goes we need someone to take over and there are a couple of people who said they would do it to continue after. Once you start an organization, for example a business... how are you going to close it? Now Indo-Africa charities, registered charities it's tough to have a good reputation and all that, but how do you work in that? You have to find somebody like minded with interest in the project, even in different projects, whatever they want to do they will find somebody with a good commitment, total commitment. That's what we are you know, total commitment to serve wherever we are in India, Uganda or here. You need somebody like that. People want to do it but then they do it for six months or a year and then oh, it's too much. You know? But really we are almost ten,

twelve hours a day. Now when we go to Uganda it will be fourteen hours for two of us, because she takes care of pharmacy..."

Sudha: "Accounting."

Vasant: "Twenty five, thirty thousand... no we buy medicine about twenty thousand."

Sudha: "If you don't look after it they steal it and then the nurses and doctors don't have any."

Vasant: "They don't have it so the only problem we have is misuse."

Sudha: "Because they sell it, and it comes in the wrong hands then that would be a problem."

Vasant: "If they ask we would give them. They ask and we give them instructions. In every country there are ninety nine percent, ninety eight percent good. Two percent of people will do this. Whether it be Canada or the UK, wherever you go. So we have to disperse, you know."

Shezan: "Better safe than sorry, yeah."

Vasant: "Yeah we have to be very, very careful."

Shezan: "Alright well thank you guys so much."

Vasant: "Send us your thesis after."

Shezan: "Yeah, absolutely."

[End of transcript].