

Jal F Dastur: *Parsee patriarch*

Arrived Uganda: 1923

Died: August 1991, Vancouver, British Columbia

Family: Wife Threaty (died 1974 Vancouver); daughter Roda (died 1987, Vancouver); daughter Piroj Amrolia and son Nanu Dastur live in Vancouver.

The account below is in the late Mr Jal F Dastur's own words (from notes left with his daughter Piroj Amrolia and given to VIVJ at Vancouver, April 2010). Reproduction here is after some minimal paraphrasing and editing.

My father Fakirji Dastur passed away at the age of 53 due to a stroke, leaving behind him three boys and three girls in the care of my mother. The only help my mother had was from my two elder step-brothers, one of them Pesi Dastur, who had come to Uganda in 1908 before me and died at the young age of 33.

In 1923 I saw an ad in the *Times* of India by M/s Narandas Rajaram Co Ltd: **“WANTED FOR UGANDA, AFRICA, YOUNG HARD WORKING, KNOWING ACCOUNTS AND OTHER WORK. GOOD PROSPECTS.”** The company dealt in cotton. I paid them a visit in Bombay and accepted their job offer. I sailed for Africa on May 5, 1923 in a steamship named *SS Taroba*. The voyage lasted eleven days. I was met at Mombasa by a relative, Sorabji Hooker, and proceeded to Kampala by train via Kisumu, which then was the terminal point for the Uganda Railway. From Kisumu I took a boat to Port Bell, a journey of two nights. I just loved the beauty of Uganda and its islands, the lake teeming with hippos and crocodiles.

My employers posted me to their ginnery in Kawempe and after eighteen months transferred me to their ginnery in Namasumbi. The conditions of work were hard and I only came through because of my faith in prayers. My luck changed out of an adversity when the manager minding

the ginnery in Bugerere District died and I was asked to take over his functions. I had enough of this after three years, and on a trip to India I decided to call it quits but had to reconsider as I had my mother and sisters to support. On my return I found Narandas Rajaram had acquired two more ginneries (at Kidzi and Kaboyo) from four Europeans who had defaulted on their loan from their company. I was put in charge of those two ginneries as well as one at Kyabakuzza which belonged to Janmohamed Allidina but was financed by *NR Co*.

On my visit to India in 1929, I got married to Threaty Bhagulia. We set up our first home – two bedrooms – of galvanized corrugated iron sheets (GCI) sheets. Our first daughter Roda was born in 1931, second daughter Piroj in 1934 and son Nanu in 1940. During our stay in Kidzi there were only eight other Asian families there, six working at the ginnery and two running *dukas* (shops). The closest town was Masaka, ten miles away. My children were home-tutored and home-doctored. In fact locals came every morning to seek medical help from my wife. Both she and I participated in Masaka's public life.

My association with *Narandas Rajaram Co* ended in 1944 when I partnered with *Suleman Verjee & Bros* in their ginneries at Bilawri and Kasozi in Busoga District, near Jinja. My wife stayed on in Jinja to educate our children. I was also partners with *Mawji Karim & Sons Ltd* in their produce business and with *M/s Navivumbi Timber Co Ltd*. The company owned large forests of *Mvule* and *Mahogany* trees.

In 1946 I ventured on my own and moved to Kampala. The company was first registered as *Colonial*



Distributors Ltd to import general goods and later changed the name to *Dastur Ltd*. I was the sole agent for *British India General Insurance Co Ltd* with responsibilities for the whole East African region.

Many of my intended projects failed to materialize because of “Amin” – the 1971 coup and the 1972 expulsion. My company was the agent of *M/s Godrej & Boyce* of Bombay, importing steel furniture. My son Nanu was in-charge of this department. In 1968 I decided to establish an assembly plant for steel furniture in Uganda in partnership with *Godrej & Boyce* and the *Madhvani Group*. The land and the required licences were secured after much red-tape, but *Godrej & Boyce* became uneasy about the political situation in Uganda. In 1969 I floated a company in the name of *Central Properties Ltd* to specialize in property development. The 13 partners each subscribed one lakh shillings (Sh1,00,000; sic about the commas). Plots and loan were acquired with the intention to build an 11-storey highrise office building opposite the High Court. Amin intervened. The same story and fate befell a partnership project with Mr Jack Sentongo (later Finance Minister, 1979/80) for a galvanizing plant – licence secured after much difficulty, loan lined up, Amin coup intervened.

I was the first person from the Asian community to join the Democratic Party when it opened up to Asians. I contributed to its fund-

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ing. I was invited by party chairman Mr Ben Kiwanuka to stand for elections in 1960. I was defeated by a few votes, due to last-minute manoeuvring by my opponent. During the second election, Apollo Milton Obote invited me to join the UPC but I declined as it could affect my business prospects.

Among my achievements I am most proud of my services to our community. I was the founding member of the Zoroastrian Association of Parsees of Uganda in 1926, starting as Honorary Secretary and then President. By

the early 1950s it was realized that the community had to have its own burial ground. This was acquired in 1953 at the nominal rent of two shillings per year. I acted as the community priest.

When the expulsion came I was still an active member of several chambers of commerce, school boards and the Indian Association. My last duty to the Asian community was as an advisor to the Coordination Committee for the Refugees. My wife and I left Uganda to settle in Canada with my children.”

The impeccable CV (from notes given by Piroj Amrolia)

Trade and Commerce: Government

- Sole Price Fixing Committee Member, WWII
- Member of Whisky and Liquor Board
- Advisory Board of Ministry of Commerce and Industry
- Senior Vice President of Uganda Chamber of Commerce
- Hon Sec and Vice President of Indian Chamber of Commerce
- Member and rapporteur of Uganda Trade Delegation to India
- Board of East African Railways and Harbours; and East African Telecommunications

Associations

- Hon Secretary of Indian Association, Masaka; Hon Secretary of Indian Association, Kampala; and Hon Secretary of Central Council of Indian Associations of Uganda
- Founding member of Tenants Association. Member of Rent Control Board
- Councillor on Kampala Municipal Council, pre-Independence. Chairman of Administration and Finance Committee; Alderman for six years
- Jury and assessor service in important cases, such the Armoury Case

Education

- Member (with Mrs Threaty Dastur) of District Education Board for Masaka District
- Member of Kampala and District Education Board
- Member of school boards: Kampala Municipal Council School; City High School (created on Mr Dastur's "coffee table"; admitted many African students free of charge); Nakasero European School (only Asian member ever); Nakivubo High School (largest school in Kampala with 1,800 pupils)

Audience with World's Who's Who

HM the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh; Princess Margaret and Lord Snowden; Pope Pius; HH Aga Khan IV and Begum; His Holiness Dai of the Bohra Community; Jawaharlal Nehru (in Bombay); all governors of Uganda; all High Priests of all Asian communities.



Mrs Threaty Dastur:

In her own right

(from notes given by daughter Piroj Amrolia, Vancouver, Nov 2010)

Mrs Threaty Dastur came to Uganda in 1929 upon her marriage to Mr Jal Dastur. They were initially based at Masaka in a ginnery owned by *Narandas Rajaram & Co.* She became a member of the Masaka District Education Board. The experience gained from this appointment propelled her to serve the needy. In Kampala she was a member on the Executive Committee of the Indian Association and treasurer of their nursery school.

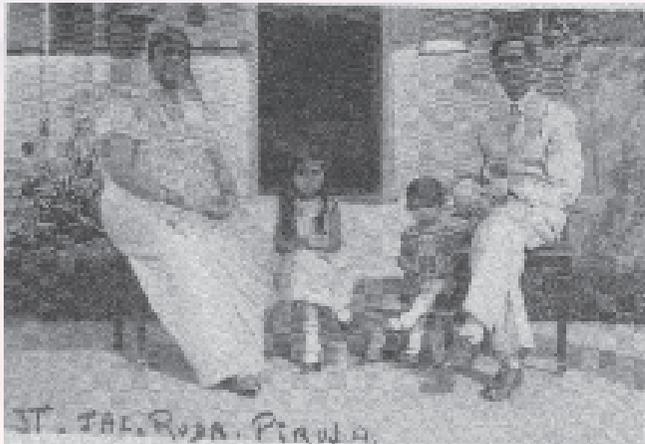


She sat on the Executive Committee of the Parsee Zoroastrian *Anjuman* from 1952 to 1961. She served on Uganda Red Cross as a treasurer, the Salvation Army, the YWCA, and Women's Corona Society that helped women and

children in crisis. She worked on the Free Scholarship Committee to raise funds to subsidize poor children's education. She sat on the board of the Family Planning Association of Uganda, representing the organization at the 17th International Conference in Delhi. She met Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi. Possibly her most satisfying work was with the Uganda Council of Women as its treasurer from 1948 to 1968. The council assisted women in establishing in business.

In 1972, despite the turmoil and chaos of the expulsion, Threaty worked tirelessly to ensure that Asian people with limited means could travel out to their diaspora countries.

Hers was a life of commitment to the community with a passion. She understood the importance of a small gesture in making or breaking a project. In particular that to rescue children in need is to ensure the survival of the society itself.



L2R: Ramakant; Chief Justice of India and Madam; Mr Singh, High Commissioner of India; Jal Dastur