

Profile

A Lifetime of Achievements: Political Legacy, Habib M. Habib

- by Shyrose Jaffer Dhalla



Cameras clicked rapidly and excited television crews clamoured to record the historic moment as the first airplane of Ugandan refugees landed onto British soil in 1972. A hush fell over the expectant crowd at Stansted Airport, as the airplane doors opened and a weary, young couple with a small baby emerged at the airplane steps. An elderly couple, presumably their parents, followed closely behind. Suddenly, a powerful gust of icy cold wind blasted across the tarmac and the young mother visibly winced and quickly, instinctively, wrapped the thin fabric of her saree more tightly around her shoulders.

It was a poignant, life-altering moment for a 29 year old student, Habib M. Habib, as he witnessed the scene from amongst the crowd of invited dignitaries. "I saw that vulnerable, young family and it was as if I was seeing my own parents arriving with me in their arms, in East Africa. I felt a real connection to all those displaced people who suddenly had no place to go. What would the conditions be like for them in the empty army

barracks that would be their new home? What would the future hold for them? How would they earn a living? Their facial expressions of shock, confusion and apprehension spoke volumes. It made me realize how difficult, how tragic life can be and how important it is for us humans to help one another in times of crisis. And I realized that these families were the *lucky ones!* They were the ones who had been granted a safe place to flee to. What of the ones who were still stateless, who were still languishing in refugee camps all over Europe? And I knew then, that my work had just begun."

The previous few months had already seen the recent accounting graduate and spirited young student from small-town Lindi, Tanzania, spending countless hardworking hours to attain refugee asylum for these Ugandan exiles. As vice chairman of the *Coordinating Committee for the Welfare of Evacuees from Uganda*, the gutsy student leader was working with 63 Welfare and Immigrant organizations in the UK set up to deal with the problems raised by the expulsion of Asians from Uganda.

Driven by his visceral reaction of concern at the airport, Br. Habib and his colleagues conducted follow-up visits to the evacuees at their army barracks and quickly unearthed a curious plight faced by them: scores of families had been compelled to *separate* because some members either did not have British passports, their Ugandan passports had been seized by the authorities or they had lost or failed to obtain birth certificates. More often than not, it left a considerable number of women and children in England while husbands and other family members remained scattered

somewhere in refugee camps across Europe, in limbo, stateless and with nowhere to go.

An elocution champion and debate winner from his regimented, British schooling days of Lindi, Br. Habib confidently set out on a mission to convince and negotiate with the British government for the reunification of these families. That decision ultimately proved to be the impetus that would swiftly catapult him into unclaimed fame, initiation into British politics and a lifetime of political endeavours and achievements.

"We read all about it in the newspapers," proudly remembers childhood friend, well-known community leader and NASIMCO Executive Councillor Br. Husain Ismail of New York, USA. "The London Times and Evening Standard had extensive coverage and pictures of how this young South Asian student had persuaded powerful ministers from the British government to allow stateless Ugandans to be reunited with their spouses here.

He then personally visited the refugee camps in Rome, Belgium, Italy and Austria to find and identify those men who had been separated from their families. Some worried that he was raising helpless people's hopes and that the government would never agree. So it was quite a moment when the favourable decision was announced in the House of Commons in 1972; Habib came into the political limelight at that time and has been involved with leadership ever since. As we all saw from his recent work at the World Federation Extraordinary Conference and with NASIMCO, Habib still hasn't lost his charm, his drive and his dedication to community work."

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The rising student's advocacy efforts were quickly noticed by the Liberal Party's Lord Avebury who recruited Br. Habib to run as a 1973 Liberal candidate for the Greater London Council. A popular parliamentary candidate in North London placed him in the important position of being his campaign manager and it was not long before Habib M. Habib had become the chairman of the Brent East District Liberal party.

His political career, since moving to Seattle, USA in the 1990's, has continued on a further, unprecedented and remarkably steep incline. A Commissioner to the Washington State Commission on Asian Pacific Affairs for over 12 years, Habib M. Habib is now the third highest ranking Democrat (in President Obama's party) in the

State of Washington, USA and listed as one of the top one hundred prominent South Asians in the USA in a 'Who's Who list' published by Roshni International. The impressive and glossy, hardcover coffee table book profiles Br. Habib's political achievements alongside other famous names such as Dr. Deepak Chopra, television personality Madhur Jaffrey and film makers Mira Nair and Ismail Merchant.

Such distinctions are only expected when one devotes their life so wholeheartedly to public service. A glance at over 50 American newspaper articles chronicling Br. Habib's participation in various political and advocacy causes reveals an extraordinary list of committees, acronyms and history of leadership roles. He has served as Chairman of the Indian Arts and Heritage Society for several years, been a member of a steering committee for Asian Pacific Islander Coalition (APIC) of King County for over 12 years and was appointed as Chairman of the Community Advisory Council (to County Mayor) of Snohomish County for 2005-2006.

In 1997, Washington State Governor (and current US Commerce Secretary Gary Locke) appointed Br. Habib (and subsequently reappointed him for a total of 12 years) as Commissioner to the Washington State Commission on Asian Pacific Affairs (CAPAA).

He was elected 2001 Chair of the 38th Legislative District Democrats (one of the only two Asian district chairs and *the only Muslim* out of 49 districts in Washington State from either party), was past vice-chair of the 44th Legislative District Democrats and vice-chair of the Washington State Asian Democratic Caucus.

Elected as a delegate to officially nominate presidential hopeful John Kerry, Br. Habib was one of only four Asians who earned entry into the prestigious 2004 Democratic National convention by winning elections at caucuses and becoming, in the words of Greater Seattle's daily newspaper, *The Herald*, "a part of history". He continues his role (since 2003) as Treasurer of the Washington State Democratic Central committee placing him as the 3rd highest ranking democrat in the state of Washington. Habib recently joined NASIMCO as honorary Secretary General.

"Advocating for the Ugandans and being able to witness the political process in motion was an intensely compelling experience," says Br. Habib as he attempts to explain what initially hooked him to politics. "For the British government, the decision to grant asylum to the refugees was a huge and, frankly, difficult one to make. I saw, first-hand, that victory against all odds *can* happen but that it doesn't happen overnight or because of one person. In this case, a tremendous amount of people had to really work together along with continuous pressure from the United Nations. It was humbling to realize how Allah (s.w.t) placed the right people in the right place at the right time. And thus I saw how common people can galvanize forces, join

others with strong voices and with the Mercy and Grace of Allah (s.w.t) make something really monumental happen. And I suppose you can say it was then that I realized that politics is really the "art of the possible".

Former president of World Federation, Alhaj Hasnain Walji smiles fondly at the memories of his articulate and idealistic mate from their dormitory days in London at the 'East Africa House'. "Some are made leaders and some just emerge as leaders.

Habib emerged as a natural leader back in the sixties. He was at the service of the community when the community was displaced by Idi Amin and even before that, when the early batch of Khoja Shia Ithnaasheri students in London needed one."

In fact, within a year of his arrival as a student in London, England, Br. Habib was already vice president of the Tanzania Students Association, organizing events that hosted high profile dignitaries such as Tanzania's then Finance Minister Amir Jamal and other cabinet ministers. Soon, he became president of the Ithnasheri Students Union which led the busy 23 year old to ambitiously set to work writing up a constitution for the group while organizing majalises and social events for the burgeoning Shia community of students and immigrant families.

That initial constitution, laboriously handwritten and compiled as he meticulously rewrote clauses and carefully examined the constitutions of Tanzania Students Association and Dar es Salaam Jamaat (painstakingly obtained by international mail via the British post) still remains the *original constitution* that is currently in use by the London Jamaat (with subsequent amendments over the years).

"His talents in organizational dynamics have served many political and civic causes," explains Br. Hasnain

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