



Rajnikant Shamji Shah, author of Bapa's Story

Rajnikant Shamji Shah, is not only a book about his father's life and family, but also describes a time and place that would have been familiar to many migrating Oshwals at the turn of the twentieth century.

This project has been a five-year labour of love for Rajnibhai and is a wonderful achievement for someone in his seventies, who has had very little formal education. To make it appealing for the younger generation, Bapa's Story is written in clear and simple English, and is brought to life by over 70 photographs, maps and illustrations. There are detailed descriptions of Mombasa and Nairobi at the turn of the 20th century, explanations of how the Shah and Haria surnames originated, as well as a glossary of Gujarati and Kutchhi words used in the text. In addition, Rajnibhai has cited sources for key facts and statistics wherever possible in the form of official records, publications or private correspondence.

Below is a message sent by Gulab Khimchand Shah, from Scottsdale, Arizona, USA.

"Thank you very much for the book.... It is interesting to know the struggles your Bapa and Mother went through. It mirrors the struggles so many of our pioneers went through and really gives insight of what our lives were like just two generations ago. It portrays our village life so well. Our new generations have grown up in the western world with all the comforts of life and good financial resources. It is very important for them to know how we got there and appreciate the contributions of our parents and grandparents to get them there."

Here, in Rajnibhai's own words, is what inspired him to write the book.

Firstly, can you tell us something about yourself?

I was born in Padana, India and moved to Nairobi, Kenya in 1949. There, I married Previna Bhimji Anand Bid and we immigrated to the UK in 1967. We have lived in London ever since, firstly in Finchley and now in North Harrow. I worked for London Transport for over 33 years, and retired in 2003. I am actively involved in the lives of my three daughters and their families, (including eight grandchildren), and am a keen gardener, snooker player and DIY enthusiast.

When did you first become interested in your family history?

I spent many hours in the 1970's with my mother, Dematbai, discussing our past. She could remember in great detail, the names of previous generations of the Haria family, as well as the connections between them. I

Like many pioneering Indians of the time, Shamji Jivraj Haria left his home in Gujarat and travelled to East Africa, in the hope of forging a better life for himself. The year was 1895 and he was just 15 years old.

Bapa's Story, written by

felt it was important to record all this while she was still alive, or the information would be lost. I also contacted elderly and distant relatives around the world. In this way I was able to trace the male line back seven generations and compile the first Haria family tree (a fold-out version of this is in the book). My nephew, Kamlesh Haria, now updates and maintains the family tree on a website-<http://kamlesh1960.tribalpages.com>,

What prompted you to write this book?

While I was compiling the family tree I realised that I knew very little about the early life of my father, whom I called Bapa. I started to collect information about him firstly from my mother and my elder siblings and then from the wider family. Then, about 6 years ago my eldest grandchild, Tanvi, asked me questions about our family history as she had a school project on migration. She told me that I should write it down in a book, as it was an interesting story. My wife and daughters also encouraged me.

How did you go about writing it?

In December 2006, my youngest daughter, Seema Amey, bought me a computer and installed it in my house. Until then I had not touched a computer and did not know how to use one. Seema guided me step by step and showed me how to send emails, search the internet and use word processing programmes. She encouraged me to research and write down my family history using the computer.

In what way did your family get involved?

All three of my daughters were closely involved. The eldest, Rajvee Punatar spent many hours editing my writing and correcting my grammar mistakes. This was not an easy task for her as I am not a writer and English is not my first language. My youngest daughter, Seema, also spent many hours finalising the illustrations, layout, and cover design, and brought it to a professional standard. Finally, some of the best suggestions for improving the book were made by my middle daughter, Neera Johnson, after her critical reading of the manuscript.

How has your extended family reacted?

It has been wonderful. I have received many positive phone calls, emails, and even Facebook messages from all over the world. Also, in January this year, my nephews Anil and Sudhir Meghji Shah, together with the help of my extended family organised a party to celebrate the publication of the book. Over 110 of Bapa's descendents were able to attend, including several great-great grandchildren. We also had a "Meet the Family" session where younger members of the family were asked to talk about themselves and explain how they were related to Bapa. It was a great way for everyone to get together and celebrate a common history.

What would you like to achieve with the book?

I have dedicated this book to my children, grandchildren and the generations after them. I hope they will learn something valuable about their roots and their heritage, just as I have, in writing this book. I also hope it will encourage others in the community to research and record their family history – if someone like me can do it then anyone can!