



His grandparents and parents witnessed the bitter partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. The family had to endure the pain of forced displacement as they left the city of Amritsar and migrated to Lahore in newly created Pakistan. Owing to economic instability in Pakistan, the family decided to move to East Africa. Then, political instability meant that once again, the family had to move, this time to England.



SALEEM R SHEIKH,
SENIOR PARTNER,
GSC SOLICITORS LLP

FROM KENYA TO PRE-EMINENCE IN THE UK

Saleem Sheikh has scaled the heights of his profession at his legal firm GSC Solicitors LLP in London. He specialises in international and offshore structuring, arbitration and dispute resolution. Saleem advises private individuals and corporate clients whose business and personal interests are international in nature.

Saleem trained with GSC Solicitors LLP, became a partner in 1985 and was appointed Senior Partner in 2001. He attended the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) from 1977 to 1980 and obtained a degree in law (LLB). He did his post-graduate degree at the College of Law (1980 to 1981) and qualified as a solicitor in 1983.

THE TRAUMA OF PARTITION

Recalls Saleem, “Leaving behind friends, relatives, assets and a whole life was a traumatic experience, and just before partition my grandfather died. So, it was a very difficult phase for my family both emotionally and economically.”

“My uncles, who were already in Kenya, namely, Saddique and Jamil Sheikh helped us to settle in Kenya.”

“My father, Manzoor-Ul-Haq Sheikh was a senior civil servant in the British Government in Kenya before the Kenyan independence.”

It was Manzoor’s education and experience in India helped him to secure a job in the government and

establish the family in Kenya.

“My father was a graduate and post-graduate from the Government College in Lahore where he read English, Farsi and Economics, and he always wanted a good education for his children. Back then Kenya was a developing country, and had a fairly good English education system,” he recalls.

KENYAN INDEPENDENCE AND THEREAFTER

Of all the East African countries, Kenya was one of the most developed. Saleem recalls Jomo Kenyatta’s leadership and the freedom struggle that paralysed East Africa in the 60s.



► “I remember going to town with my father for the first Independence Day celebrations and seeing Kenyan flags everywhere. There was euphoria in the country and people felt liberated. However, after the initial days of celebrations the nation began to realise the difficulties that lay ahead especially in terms of running administrative and infrastructure services,” he explains.

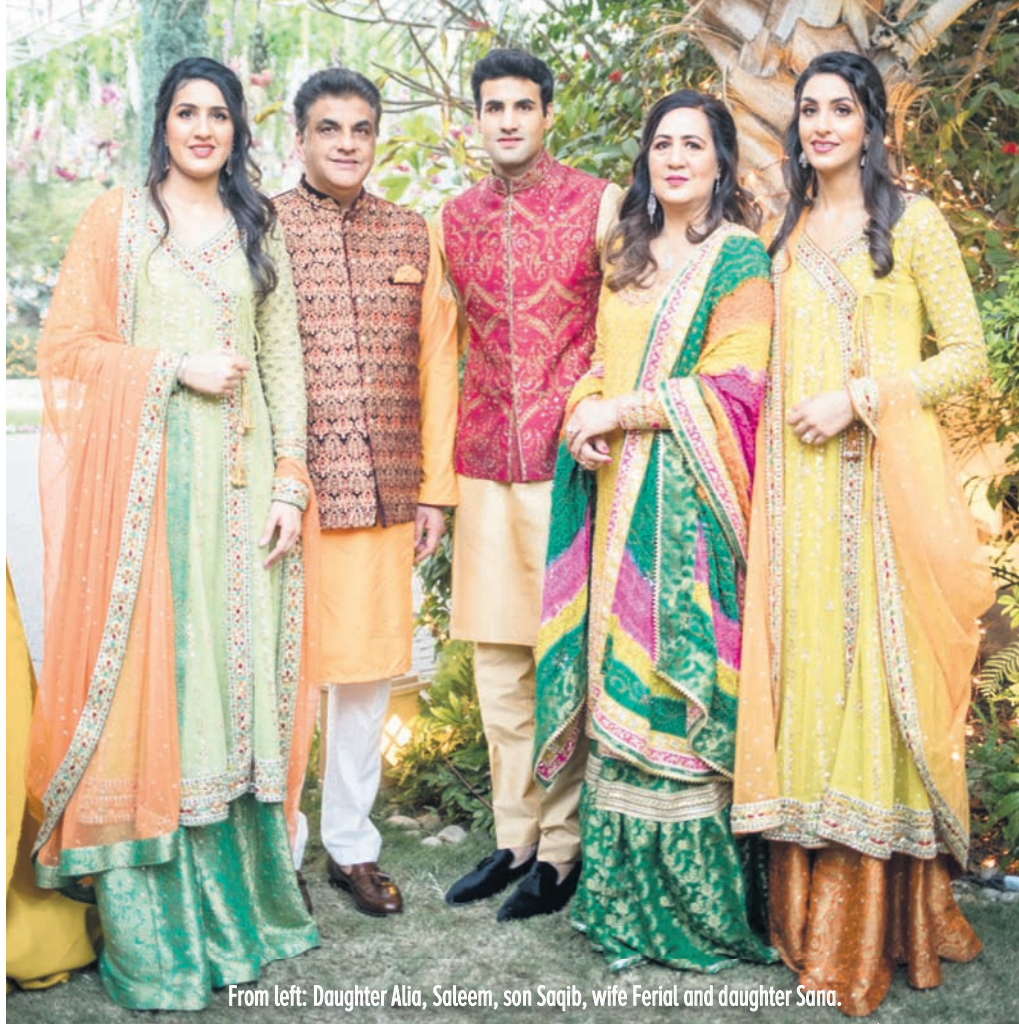
In the early 1900s East Africa witnessed a significant influx of Asian migrants. They came predominantly as recruits of the British Government who were building the railways. Over the years, many Asians established themselves as successful businesses, giving them significant hegemony over the economy of the country. However, this gave rise to increasing hostility towards them from the native African community. Eventually, the demarcation and segregation of the settled immigrants followed with the process of 'Africanisation.' Saleem recalls the extreme hardship that his uncles had to endure during that time while managing their businesses.

“My uncles, Sheikh Mohammed Bashir and Sheikh Abdul Rashid, were the first Asian hoteliers in Kenya. Earlier Asians were not allowed into hotels. It was a “whites-only” domain. My uncle Bashir had gone to a hotel for a business meeting with a European businessman, but was denied entry on the grounds of being an Asian. It was then that my uncle resolved to buy the hotel someday, which he eventually did,” he recalls.

A similar hostile climate prevailed in Uganda too. But, unlike Kenya, in Uganda people were forced to leave the country in 1971-72 by President Idi Amin. According to Saleem the exodus of Asians from Kenya was a “subtle political maneuver.” Unlike Uganda, they were presented with a choice between retaining either their British or Kenyan passports. Under President Amin's rule all Asians were forced to leave Uganda in 28 days.

Says Saleem, “President Jomo Kenyatta was not as dictatorial as Idi Amin and many people decided to stay back. The Kenyan Asians left in a more orderly way, but regardless of that it was an exodus.”

“We were presented with two options - either adopt a Kenyan passport and stay or retain our British passports and leave for the



From left: Daughter Alia, Saleem, son Saqib, wife Ferial and daughter Sana.

UK. My father's decision to leave for the UK was mainly to get better education and security.”

“I was born in Kenya. Life there was very comfortable. We had a lovely home and the family was well settled. But my father was looking at our long-term future. He knew that it would probably be uncertain, especially for the children if we stayed on in Kenya. Thus, in 1967 my father and my brother Shahid became the first members of the Sheikh family to leave Kenya and head to the UK.”

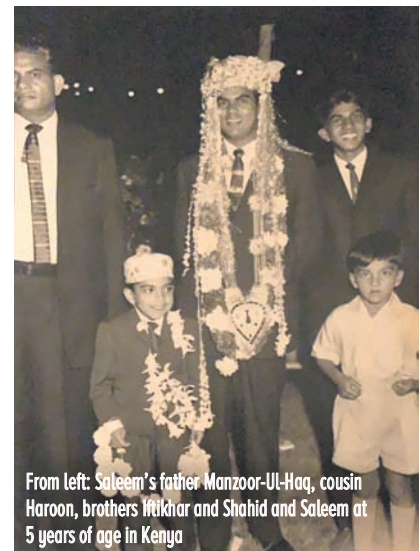
FIRST STEPS IN THE UK

Manzoor left Kenya and migrated to the UK expecting to find a white-collar job, given his education and experience. Saleem recalls the institutional racism that existed in the UK's in the late 60s and early 70s. Most Asians in the UK were slaving away in blue collar jobs but Manzoor managed to secure an administrative position in a large international hotel.

“Having settled down, my father called us over, and initially my mother Hamida Begum Sheikh, along with myself and my siblings Shahnaz, Talaat and Aleem arrived in the UK. But my oldest brother, Iftikhar, who was General Sales Manager with Burroughs Welcome and his wife, Kishwar, stayed behind

to wind up our affairs and sell our home. My sister Azra was at University in Nairobi finishing her graduation. They joined us in London a few years later, so, our family migrated to the UK in phases,” he remembers.

When he arrived in August 1967 Saleem imagined England to have picturesque landscapes, red buses and telephone boxes. However, in reality he was welcomed by large concrete buildings and the classic British weather: dull grey skies, and light rainfall. During the first few weeks adapting to British life was difficult. He recalls the occasional



From left: Saleem's father Manzoor-Ul-Haq, cousin Haroon, brothers Iftikhar and Shahid and Saleem at 5 years of age in Kenya



sunny days that were spent watching apples grow in the back garden of his house.

"My father rented modest accommodation for us, but we were used to a relatively luxurious house with staff at our disposal to help my mother with her day-to-day domestic chores," he explains.

Saleem recalls moving home a few times. When they eventually settled down, he got a place in a junior school in Isleworth. While Saleem was never bullied or discriminated against, he says that there did exist a certain hostility towards immigrants at the height of the Enoch Powell years and the Skinhead culture in the 70s.

"When I joined school, I was probably the only Asian, and I was a complete alien to the other children. They didn't know where Kenya was to begin with. When I explained that I was from Africa, they would ask me questions about Tarzan and jungles. I remember some of them asking me if people in Africa swung from trees!"

PILOT OR PERRY MASON

Despite the difficult cultural and economic challenges, Saleem managed to pursue an academic career in law. As a child, he had dreamt of becoming a pilot. However, he decided to become a lawyer, which he thought would give him the opportunity to confront various injustices he had witnessed on his journey from Kenya to the UK. He recalls spending his early days watching TV shows such as Crown Court and Perry Mason and being intrigued by the dynamics of the courtroom. He was also encouraged by his father, Manzoor and uncle Bashir to pursue a

career in law.

"My uncle sparked my interest in law at a time when many Asians were studying accountancy, pharmacy and medicine. I remember him saying that a good lawyer was worth his weight in gold," he recalls.

While reading law at the LSE in 1977, determined and hardworking, he recalls the hours spent in courtrooms where he drew inspiration from professionals who fought their legal battles. In the process, he learnt how to construct legal arguments from his professor Michael Xander's sessions on *'The wrongs of law'*.

When Saleem finished law school, it was time to find a job. This was the first time that he encountered discrimination as he felt that a number of doors at the larger law firms were closed to him. However, through perseverance, Saleem obtained a training contract in 1981, with GSC, then known as Green David Conway & Co. After qualifying in 1983, an ambitious Saleem sprinted up the legal ladder to become a partner at the firm within two years of qualification.

"I was mentored by John Green, who was the senior partner of the firm at the time. He inspired me to become a leading lawyer in the growing Asian business community," recalls Saleem.



Saleem (third on the right) with his sister Shahnaz and brothers Aleem and Talaat.

LEGAL PRE-EMINENCE

Saleem is recognised in both the CityWealth Leaders List and the Legal 500 as being a prominent figure advising on succession and wealth planning.

Throughout Saleem's legal career he had to take on the role of educating clients to put proper documentation in place. "As Asian businesses have grown, one of the common contentious areas within the community is the lack of contracts and documentation. The practice of many in our communities to rely on informal agreements among family members can lead to disastrous consequences in cases of a fall-out or a death" he says.

Over time, Saleem's role has morphed from that of a lawyer to becoming a trusted advisor, particularly to the Asian community, where disputes in the family related to wealth and inheritance have multiplied and family businesses disintegrate. He prescribes not just his legal medicine, but he is a trusted confidante and an emotional support to his clients. From advising about inter-generational wealth protection and succession to handling offshore and onshore structures, Saleem has been a guiding light to his clients.

"Now, people are savvier about getting things documented and having a shareholders' agreement in place. At the same time, I have also seen a considerable increase in the number of pre-nups being signed before marriage at a time when one in three people are getting divorced. So, there is an increased awareness around legal documentation in our community," he explains.

Saleem is a linguaphile and is well-versed in several languages including Urdu, Punjabi, Kiswahili, Kachhi, Hindi, Gujarati and French. He has international clients who have assets and business interests in the UK, Sub-Saharan Africa, India, Pakistan, GCC Region, CIS countries, China and North America.

He is a member of the International Bar Association and the London Court of International Arbitration. He is also an Associate of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators.

Saleem was also the winner of 'Entrepreneurial Individual of the Year' in the Magic Circle Awards 2017, the most significant award in the legal sector.

He is on the list of 100 Power Muslim that comprises of people who have the influence, hold significant power and who have achieved excellence within their sector.

Saleem is married to Ferial who is also a graduate from the LSE and a lawyer, and has three children. His son Saqib who is a graduate from Boston University, runs his own businesses. His daughter Sana, a law graduate from Cambridge University, followed in her father's footsteps working as an associate solicitor at GSC Solicitors looking after firm's private client base as well as leading on GSC's Next Generation programme. Saleem's youngest daughter Alia who is a graduate from LSE and Imperial College London, works as a senior management consultant at Ernst & Young.

