

ORIGINS OF A PASSAGE TO EAST AFRICA



Diwan Sawan Mal Chopra in the fortress at Multan, Punjab. Picture Credit: Courtesy of the Council of the National Army Museum, London.



It seems to be the fate of the family at times to rise high and at other times to be at their lowest ebb. So begins an unfinished note on the "Origin of the Family" amongst the papers of Iqbal Chand Chopra. With an imposing bold round hand that carries his stentorian voice, he surmised: It may be due to the temperament that the members of the family take undue risks, which make them go up and sometimes right down; or it may be due to good or bad fortune.



Jarat Chopra

Whether by a fiat of predestination or reckless abandon, or rather both, Chopra exchanged the bounty of India for the perils of Africa in a personal rite of passage from privilege to responsibility. A *kshatriya* (warrior caste) heritage had instilled in him a fastidious sense of 'duty', which he believed to be the engine of his success. Altogether, the experience yielded a ferocious philosophy and an unforgiving standard to which he held his sons: "Iron through Fire becomes Steel."

City of the Sun

The immense green-bronze, "cloud-tearing" Zamzama cannon inscribed with Persian sobriquets was the mightiest of weapons and smelted from a pot from each household in Lahore as a tax levied on all infidels. Kipling paid homage to the "Lion's Roar" of *Kim's* opening scene: who holds the "fire-breathing dragon" holds the Punjab, for it is always first of the conqueror's loot. Eventually, it was hauled to Gujranwala and delivered a string of victories, until severely damaged it fell silent and retired to the Lahore museum. Not before, however, it had in 1818 wrested Multan from the Durrani Afghans by blowing in the gates of the city and thus securing the throne and farthest reaches of a loose-knit Sikh Empire.

The Diwan Sawan Mal Chopra was then a courtier at the Durbar of Maharajah Ranjit Singh and a trusted, intimate confidant, both hailing from their native Gujranwala. Uniquely combining the talents for territorial expansion and administrative consolidation, Sawan Mal, they agreed, would assume the pivotal governorship of Multan and its environs.

Located on the southern Hindu Kush route plied by caravans and invaders between Central and South Asia, Multan was ever wealthy and forever plundered. It is graven in annals of the

West as the site where Alexander the Great's breastplate and ribcage were pierced by a defender's arrow when he led the assault on the town ramparts. He would have perished from the critical wound but for the protection of the legendary Shield of Achilles obtained at Troy and shouldered by a fellow Macedonian. Vengeance was furious, with no quarter spared to any inhabitant in what marks one of the notorious episodes in classical literature of subjugation by terror. The conflagration ending the campaign is solemnly commemorated thirty feet below the ground by an arm's length layer of ashes and burnt earth.

In Eastern antiquity, Multan was venerated as a principal crucible of sun worship. On a hill above a dry bed of the Ravi River, the wonder of the temple to the solar deity Aditya served as a sacred destination for pilgrims seeking divine relief through profuse offerings of valuables, ornaments and perfumes. Behind colossal doors, under a gilded cupola, and amidst lofty columns and coloured walls, with heads and beards shaven, devotees circumambulated the object of reverence and awe. On a square brick platform, the looming, solid gold idol had a human shape, seated with its legs bent in a quadrangular posture, its hands resting upon its knees with fingers closed, so only four could be counted. It was covered with a red skin like morocco leather and adorned with precious gems, pearls and rarities. Nothing but its eyes of resplendent red rubies were visible beneath a jewel-encrusted crown of gold.

This statue of the sun-god was broken to pieces, the priests massacred and the sanctuary converted into a mosque, not for the first but for the last time, by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. The Jami Masjid became the epicentre of a formidable citadel and an impregnable fortress, a landmark of the subcontinent's defence engineering,

encompassed by three miles of a wall 40-70 feet high and eight feet thick, with 46 bastions and four gates each flanked by two towers.

Once invested at Multan, Sawan Mal commenced the formation of his own kingdom. He reinforced further the fortifications, constructed a moat 40 feet wide and 25 feet deep, and raised the strongest contingents in the nominal Army of Lahore. Only the Dogra Rajas of Jammu in the far north could match the number of heavy guns of the garrison. Wise policies generated productivity and unparalleled land revenues, keeping taxation low and earning for Sawan Mal an illustrious reputation for government. His popularity was expressed by a familiar adage that fêted the advent of his rule as a blessing. From the wedge of territory bounded by the confluence of the Indus and Sutlej rivers, he gradually increased the areas of his domain until he controlled roughly the southern half of the Punjab.

Plagued by competing interests, Ranjit Singh deemed it eminently suitable for an independent realm to flourish under a reliable ally providing a strategic bulwark against approaches from Kandahar in the West, Sindh to the South and Delhi in the East. The fealty sworn, however, was to an individual and not an institutionalized body politic with a hereditary claim to devotion. With the death of the "Lion of the Punjab" in 1839 from a series of strokes, an absence of clear or legitimate succession, and an eruption of jockeying and intrigue in a power vacuum, Sawan Mal ceased to pay even ostensible tribute to any other authority. He retained selective alliances of convenience amongst the Sikh aristocracy in Lahore as he was poised for an inevitable confrontation with the rival Dogras in a final contest for mastery of the Punjab. Instead, the flow of events was doomed to shift with the arrival of a third party on the eastern banks of the Sutlej: the British East India Company.

India's Last Stand

At a distance of five paces, the assailant drew a concealed pistol from his waistcloth and fired. The ball struck Sawan Mal on the left breast, and passing round the ribs, came out of his back and hit in the right arm an officer nearby. Another swiftly cut the assassin down. He had been a

soldier caught thieving, brought before the Diwan for trial at his morning Durbar and remanded under guard in an antechamber, but permitted excessive liberty. The victim was borne to the palace, where the serious but not dangerous wound healed for several days. It suddenly ruptured and Sawan Mal gradually sank and died at the end of September 1844.

His son, Mulraj, acceded to the chiefdom set on a collision course with the advancing *frangi* (foreigners). The cataclysm was provisionally



Lt. Col. Diwan Chand Chopra, O.B.E., Indian Medical Service, in Gujranwala Punjab. Picture Credit: Courtesy of the author.

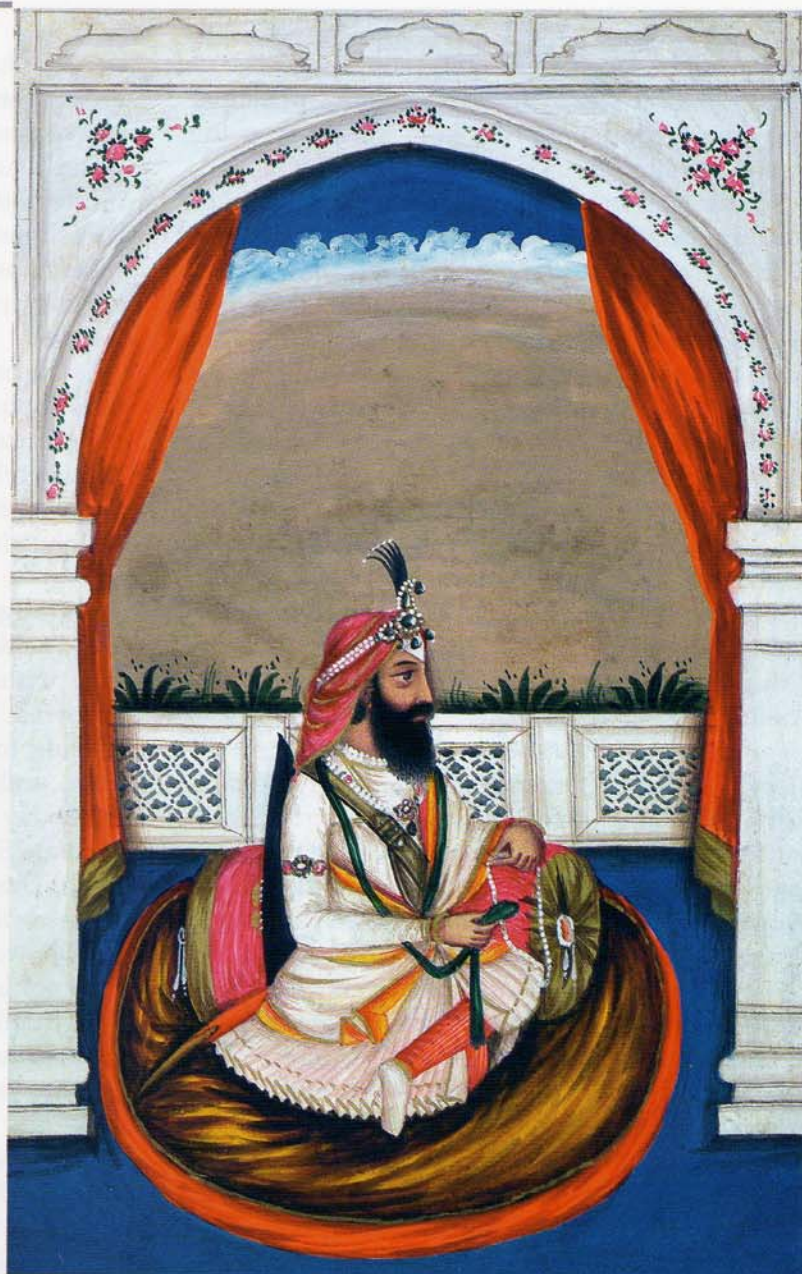
averted when the following year the First Anglo-Sikh War broke out across the Sutlej frontier between Lahore and British India. The Company prevailed, exacting compromising terms with domination by a Resident over the Sikh regime.

Meanwhile, the Dogras, in illicit league with the Company and rewarded with the sale of Kashmir, now targeted Mulraj. They instigated an exorbitant succession fee, which an indomitable Mulraj rejected. They threatened to march on Multan, but the combined forces of Lahore were not unified, inclined or in a military position to challenge the stronghold.

A separate state with an absolutist king, however, was essentially incompatible with enveloping British influence that lacked the Punjab to complete its map of possessions. On the eve of hostilities, a self-promoting, self-appointed arch-enemy, Sir Herbert Edwardes, wrote in his political diaries that the "position of the Dewan Moolraj in these parts is...of an independent sovereign" and "the independence of the Dewan in Mooltan is as anomalous and unnecessary as it is injurious." In April 1848, the Resident dispatched two British agents and a replacement to relieve Mulraj of his seat. The Diwan received the deputation graciously, but his soldiery bent on avenging the offence fell upon the emissaries...and presented their severed heads in prostration to their lord.

Mulraj recoiled at the audacity of his men. He faltered, not appreciating he had, as it were, 'crossed the Rubicon', and was now thrust into the definitive conflict. The poet Hakim Chand recites: "Then the mother of Mul Raj spoke to him: 'I will kill myself leaving a curse behind (on your head). Either lead your forces to death or get out of my sight; (and) I shall undertake the wards in my own person...'" Obeying her will, she tied around his wrist a bracelet, the declaration of an inexorable avenue.

The fuse of a Second Anglo-Sikh war was lit. Mortified by the effrontery, a collective British imagination conjured the specter of a cardinal nemesis: Mulraj was branded a "rebel" — a word that rang acerbically like "terrorist" today. In the hysteria, Multan had to fall. An unprecedented siege train was assembled at the arsenals in Delhi to supply the second biggest expenditure of firepower in the history of the British in India. The unwieldy procession transporting cannons,



Diwan Mulraj Chopra in the fortress at Multan, Punjab. Picture Credit: Courtesy of the Council of the National Army Museum, London.

mortars and munitions over four hundred miles of rough terrain in the heat of the summer included 4000 camels and a winding horde of wagons drawn by elephants, bullock and horses. Yet, when the British regiments beheld the fortress, they thought it easier to fly than to assail it.

The battalions of Mulraj were predominantly Muslim and partly Sikh, more united by local culture than divided by transcendental faith. A Hindu had transformed his struggle into a common Punjabi cause, motivating the tenacity of the fight. In civic fervor, the women of Multan committed their jewelry to the minting of emergency currency: a gold *rupee* appealing on the obverse for deliverance. The impenetrable refuge was lavishly stocked with the necessary food, fuel and armaments for a protracted stand.

Accumulated steadily, 800,000 pounds of gunpowder was stored in the principal magazine: the bombproof Jami Masjid atop the erstwhile altar to the sun.

Besieged in vain for a season, the reversal of fortune exploded in an instant. At 8:00 a.m. on 30th December, after a bombardment since dawn, a single mortar fired from a mile away sailed towards the dome of the mosque and by dreadful chance wormed its way in, igniting the contents. Contemporary descriptions resemble eyewitness accounts of an atomic detonation. Eight hundred bodies tumbled with masonry and minarets more than a thousand feet in the air and rained down in fearful confusion. There remained a long, gaping trench scarring the rock face, and a raging inferno as the vast granaries and reserves of *ghee* (clarified butter) and oil caught light. The lucky artilleryman reaped a bonus of 13 gold *mohurs*.

Subsequently reduced to the "City of the Dead", Mulraj surrendered on 22nd January, 1849, as an early morning thunderstorm subsided. Ultimately he emerged, appearing on a white Arab charger caparisoned with a lush scarlet saddlecloth. He was gorgeously attired in crimson silk and splendid arms, a richly embroidered red cloak, gold neck chain and bracelets, and a diamond ring. Unemotionally "he moved along under the general gaze, like a man conscious of deserving the admiration of even his enemies for having done his duty to the last." In a stirring memoir, Corporal John Ryder commiserated: "When we had got about half way to the camp, he turned round upon his horse, and viewed the fort, and tears then started from his eyes, and he wept much; and well he might, to see it then!—battered to a heap of ruins, while only a few months before it bade defiance to the British forces and the world, and was proud of its strength and beauty."

The famed treasure in a subterranean cache was pillaged by pocket-stuffing infanters too loaded to bother with silver. "Through the grog shops," writes a historian, "streamed the gold from one of the great fortunes of ancient India, for Mulraj's family had garnered wealth for generations." The remnants officially seized as prize monies exceeded three billion in current dollars, a dizzying sum in the accounts of the Company.

The State Prisoner was removed to the Lahore Fort and tried, symbolically in the throne room, the *Diwan-i-Aam* (Hall of Public Audience), confined by forty pillars and a red sandstone railing. The Governor-General, Lord Dalhousie,

remarked: "I cannot hang him, but I will do what he will think a thousand times worse. I will send him across the sea, what they call the 'black water' and dread far more than death." Incarcerated at Fort William, Calcutta, pending banishment to Singapore, he contracted tuberculosis. Three loyal servants with him in captivity cremated his body on a sandbank in the Ganges.

The annexation of the Punjab constituted the final conquest of India for the next century. In its pacification, Dalhousie heeded a leaf from Machiavelli, who instructs him who has newly annexed dominions, if he wishes to hold them, to extinguish the family of their former prince.

Far-Flung Mwanza

The deposed family members not in custody fled with cavalry units in hot pursuit. They followed on foot a branch of the Silk Road leading to Peshawar and Kabul via the Khyber Pass, and unused to physical exertion, on the third day reached only as far as the village of Jandiala Sher Khan, birthplace of the bard Waris Shah. The ample mud dwellings with courtyards were eerily deserted. Inside one they found an earthenware pot of *sarson ka sag* (mustard greens) on smouldering embers and a jug of warm milk, which afforded slight succour. While preparing to continue, they were startled by volleys of gunfire and the bellow of demands for the fugitives. The elder of the group disguised as a *sadhu* (ascetic) pointed to a glimmer of lights seven miles to the north and said he had seen sundry affluent people go there. The anxious troop galloped towards an elusive quarry, and a distant glow of flames arose from that hapless spot.

Engulfed by the turmoil, it was safer for the weary stragglers to break their flight and evade detection. Having escaped on a trade route, a caravan fortuitously materialized bringing dried grapes, almonds, pistachios, asafoetida and melons. It was the practice for merchants to pay a host five per cent of goods sold. By this means the family acquired a new prosperity, amassing considerable estates and re-establishing themselves in Gujranwala and Lahore.

Grandchild of the Sawan Mal and Mulraj legacy, Lala Ganga Ram Chopra was a prominent *vakil* (advocate) before the Punjab courts. Past the entrance for elephants and carriages to his residence in Gujranwala, opposite the railway station and facing the Himalayas, he would ride his adored, and uncannily intelligent and sensitive, white horse the forty miles to see his

mother at Jandiala and tend his lands in the area named after him: Kot Ganga Ram. Strangely in turn, his mother suffered a fatal accident, and his horse and he fell ill and died. His teenaged widow, denied any rights by custom, was left to rear three children: Iqbal Chand, Diwan Chand and Vidya Vati. As his father expired, a little Iqbal saw the life drain from his mother's eyes in her helplessness. The consequent ordeal profoundly affected the outlook of each sibling on women.

Male relations descended on the properties, which would have been lost if not for their submission to a British system of management-in-trust by the Court of Wards. Initially, their value was depleted by incompetent, lascivious or corrupt administrators, until rescued by a fiery Irish justice, Michael Harman Harrison, who earned the moniker of a 'hanging judge' for the capital punishments he meted out to Indian nationalists. His *Times* obituary considered his decisions "vigorous". He stabilized the vulnerable situation and under his tutelage Iqbal attended King's Inns, Dublin, and Middle Temple, and learnt how to be a barrister at the Lahore High Court. The beloved younger brother, Diwan, graduated a doctor from Edinburgh and joined the Indian Medical Service of the army.

Vidya was to be married. Iqbal chose resolutely Munishar Singh Sondhi, a civil engineer educated at St. Andrews. Figuring along his line of antecedents were the fourth Sikh Guru Ram Das and paradoxically Sodhi Sham Singh, who distinguished himself by supporting (later General Sir) John Nicholson as Mulraj's kingdom collapsed and was lionized by the British for his gallantry. After the wedding, Iqbal sought gainful employment for his brother-in-law. There, in the Governor's office, *Chopra*, he was asked, *who is this man?* He paused...and gestured at a conspicuous portrait of Sodhi Sham Singh. M.S. Sondhi was appointed to the Indian Civil Service—the I.C.S.: tantamount to assured prospects—as Executive Engineer of the Sukkur Barrage project, the world's largest irrigation works ever undertaken, with sections wider than the Suez Canal.

Iqbal, however, being of legal age when he had returned freshly qualified from Europe, transferred his father's holdings from the state and fancied the role of 'lord of the manor', with no agricultural credentials. He imported modern machinery to mechanize the farms, only to find it would have drained and rendered worthless the irrigated land. He tried to build a country house

at the fields and hired a legion of Pathans to make the bricks, but got cheated out of the wood to fire the kiln. He met a man who professed to have invented the seedless grape and the seedless orange...?! All in addition to living a profligate lifestyle epitomized by the latest red Sunbeam, billed as "The Supreme Car".

To halt the squandering of his patrimony, his mother intervened and bid her son to leave his home and prove himself elsewhere, by which she anticipated as far as Delhi or Bombay. Alas, either a rash capriccio or celestial guidance led Iqbal to purchase a ticket on a steamer bound for East Africa where, it was murmured to him, there must be a scarcity of lawyers. At Mombasa, the ship anchored midstream in Kilindini Harbour and the passengers rowed to shore adjacent to the construction of the docks. In November 1928, Kenya Colony was plagued with locust swarms of biblical proportions and graced by the royal visit of Edward, Prince of Wales. As much as he yearned to stay, Iqbal was advised he would have to wait half a year to practice, but not in Tanganyika Territory. Despairing three days spent exploring options, he repaired to the ship and proceeded to Dar es Salaam.

Gulam Rasul, a barrister recently from Lahore, kindly invited him into partnership and lodged him at the stifling New Palace Hotel, intolerable for its dearth of ventilation in the oppressive heat. Although the owners of the grander New Africa Hotel were Rasul's clients, Indians were not allowed as guests. Just as well: Iqbal would have been less inclined to relinquish the comfortable amenities. Inexplicably, the senior clerk at the firm was pressing the partners to open an office at Mwanza, in the remote wilderness. At length they relented and agreed to rotate six months each. All three boarded the train and extraordinarily, moments before departure, the police clamoured to arrest the schemer, who had obviously been plotting a getaway. Iqbal regarded it a dire omen to start a practice without a clerk.

The train pulled out of the station and Rasul travelled partway. The journey was hot and dusty in a swaying, rattling narrow coach, quite unlike the spacious luxury of the Indian railways with excellent dining cars. Iqbal endured for two days and three nights, despondent about his destination. The tracks stopped two miles south of the town and at 5 p.m. he alighted, left his luggage and walked...whereupon he saw the beauty of Lake Victoria and felt its cool breeze.

African Horizons

The law practice began on the ground floor of the vacant Africa Hotel in Ikoma Road. Surprisingly, abundant work surfaced, as if backlogged. Within five months, however, Rasul succumbed to illness and was conveyed to India where he died. Iqbal was marooned indefinitely with the bleak promise of a vague future. The caseload was varied, both criminal and civil, and the effects of the Depression extended to the interior in bankruptcies. A thriving business nonetheless did not satisfy cosmopolitan tastes or stem brooding nostalgia. Curiously, attempts to quit Mwanza were perpetually confounded.

Providence revealed its design when in 1936 a shy and retiring Canadian geologist, Dr. John Thorburn Williamson, was ushered into Iqbal's front room office lined with glass-covered bookcases. In white shirt and khaki trousers he sat in front of the broad wooden desk, a pen set and ink pot, an elegant clock encased in an intricately carved box from Gujranwala, and an ashtray he filled with cork tipped 'Craven A' butts. He wanted the legal affairs of an independent prospector to be sorted and he needed financing. The search for diamonds, though, entailed the range of skills and capacities of both men, who understood perseverance for wholly different reasons, and had been groomed by circumstances for this meeting. In friendship, they shook on more of an adventure than a commercial venture.

The complementary division of labour sustained them in darkness and deprivation, until on 6 March, 1940, particular stones in certain soil and gravel indicated in the shadow of a baobab tree the most extensive diamond deposit to be discovered. The collaboration was incorporated as Williamson Diamonds Limited, the foundation of an innovative endeavour on the arid Shinyanga plains. Williamson gained entry in *The Guinness Book of Superlatives* as the "Greatest Money Maker", his assets "transcending all other personal fortunes". A media sensation, he inspired, for instance, Ian Fleming's *Goldfinger*, whose original title

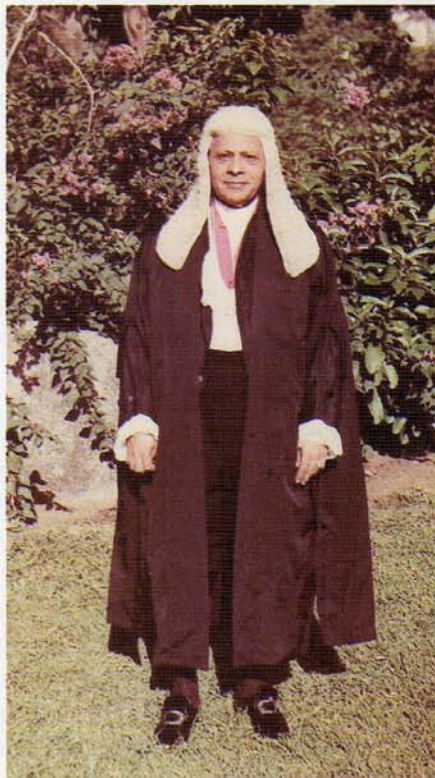
had been "The Richest Man in the World", the preferred label of the press for the 'diamond king'. Iqbal—the first Indian in Africa to 'take silk' as King's Counsel—was catapulted into a political career spanning the Legislative and Executive Councils of Tanganyika, myriad functions of government, and the imperial dynamics of the Mwadui mine and the global diamond industry.

Tragically, as if by a tyrannical principle of equilibrium, indescribable sorrow had accompanied the fantastic bonanza. A somber red pencil line traces the announcement in a yellowed clipping from *The Times of India* pasted on a sheet of paper: "Missing in Action: Lt. Col. D.C. Chopra." Posthumously, Diwan was awarded the O.B.E. (Order of the British Empire) for evacuating casualties from Malaya at the fall of Singapore.

The geographic hub of the family was gravitating. Vidya and M.S. Sondhi had since settled in Mombasa, where he launched diverse enterprises and she became, says one author, "Kenya's foremost public servant among Asian women". For 26 years she sat as the first woman elected to the Municipal Council and for 34 years headed as President the Indian Women's Association. The trend was irreversible when Partition severed ties to ancestral roots and an ensuing generation discharged their professional callings in medicine and law and engineering between Mombasa and Mwanza.

A small folded note attests in the block capitals of my father, Arjan, that at three months of age I was introduced to my grandfather at the New Stanley Hotel in Nairobi. He pressed into the palm of my hand a gold sovereign, bearing on the reverse of the Victorian crown Saint George slaying the dragon as a reminder of Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. It foretold a zero-sum lesson imparted in my father's words: according to the vicissitudes of power, there are explanations but no excuses.

(The life of Mrs. Vidyavati Sondhi will be featured in the next issue of Awaaz)



The Hon. Iqbal Chand Chopra, C.B.E., Q.C., at his house in Mwanza, Tanganyika.
Picture Credit: Courtesy of the author.