

## **Episode 8. ROHA Spotlight Podcast of Kamlu Gulrajani**

When Kamlu Gulrajani was very young, she and her brother lived with their mother in a widow's camp in India. Her mother was separated from her father and as a result was cast out to live among widows who were banished after their husbands died. This experience left an indelible mark on Kamlu. In her oral history, she relates her mother's story to give voice to women in the past who were mistreated, exploited and discriminated against. Her mother's hardships instilled in her a determination to overcome obstacles. And Kamlu gained a sense of duty to give back to her communities in order to improve the lives of the people around her.

Kamlu went on in her life to go to college and become a professional. She worked as a bank officer in India before immigrating to the United States in the early 1980s. Once in the U.S., she worked in information technology. Kamlu has been involved in numerous initiatives and organizations focusing on community service, health and wellness, and cultural heritage in Central New Jersey.

### **[Intro Music]**

Welcome to the Rutgers Oral History Archives Podcast. I am Kate Rizzi. The Rutgers Oral History Archives, ROHA for short, is dedicated to documenting the life stories of men and women in communities throughout Rutgers University and New Jersey. Visit our website at [oralhistory.rutgers.edu](http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu). This episode will shine a spotlight on Kamlu Gulrajani, who was interviewed by ROHA Director Shaun Illingworth in 2021.

Kamlu was born in December 1946 in Karachi, in what was then India and is now Pakistan. Her father, Vishindas, and her mother, Devibai, Devi for short, came from the same area of Hyderabad-Sindh. Both Sindhi Hindus from the same community, their marriage was arranged in 1942. Kamlu's brother Ramesh was born in 1943. During that time, her father served in the British Army as a customs enforcement official.

Under the dowry system, Kamlu's mother Devi faced exploitation and abuse from her in-laws and husband.

### **[Kamlu audio excerpt]**

When my mother's marriage was arranged, they had demanded a dowry. In India, they used to have a dowry system, where they demand money and gold and ornaments from the girl's side, when she is getting married.

Kamlu's father Vishindas received a very large dowry upon his marriage to Devi. At the time of their marriage, Vishindas, whose father passed away, had four sisters who were unmarried.

[Kamlu audio excerpt]

What happened was, as soon as my mother got married, the very next day, my father's sister got married, so they used my mother's dowry to pay for his sister's dowry to get married. Then, they thought that [they could put] more pressure on my mother to get more money because now they used up her money and now they want more money, so then that's when all this trouble started. They kept harassing her and beating her, and she had a miserable time.

After several years of abuse and with two young children to care for, Devi left Vishindas, only to continue to endure the stigma of being separated from her husband. Devi, Ramesh and Kamlu sought refuge in the Kurla widows camp. Kamlu compares this to the Sati system; when a husband died, the wife was burned alive on his funeral pyre.

Although Sati was outlawed, Kamlu explains how the practice evolved into the banishment of widows and divorcees:

[Kamlu audio excerpt]

If you are a widow, that is, if your husband died, then you cannot live in that same community, like you're ostracized, because you cannot remarry. That was their culture. A widow is not allowed to remarry. Her life is over. Then, that system, which is called Sati, they cannot burn a live woman with a dead husband, they had outlawed that system. They said, "Okay, then she's not allowed to mingle with the same community." So, they used to live on the outskirts of town, these widows. My mother found a place to live in one of those barracks, where those widows are living.

Kamlu explains about societal views on divorce at the time:

[Kamlu audio excerpt]

It is frowned upon. People prefer to suffer in silence and it's like an insult or degrading for any woman to be divorced, because they find fault, like maybe something is wrong with the woman, that's why she's divorced.

Many years later, Kamlu's parents officially divorced when her father wanted to get remarried.

A major event in South Asian history occurred when Kamlu was an infant: the partition. When India became independent from the United Kingdom, the subcontinent was partitioned into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. The partition took place on August 15,

1947. The result was mass migration, riots and religious conflict. An estimated two million people were killed.

With the threat of violence looming, Devi, with her two children, boarded a train for Ahmedabad, India, where a relative served as the Commissioner of Bombay State. Kamlu reflects that prior to the partition her family experienced good relations with their Muslim neighbors. Hindus and Muslims would share fruits and vegetables from their harvest. Appreciation for religious and cultural diversity was ingrained in Kamlu during her upbringing and has left an imprint on her beliefs and outlook.

The hardships faced by Devi and the obstacles that the family were forced to overcome proved to be formative experiences for Kamlu. In 1950, through the help of a charitable organization, Devi, Ramesh and Kamlu moved to Bandra in Bombay, now Mumbai. Their situation vastly improved. Many of their neighbors were also Sindhi-Hindu refugees, and the community was close-knit.

Kamlu and her brother attended English parochial schools. They received support from neighbors when they needed extra help in their studies. Kamlu also benefitted from the tutoring of her older brother, which paved the way for her academic success in school. Additionally, the family received support from local charities.

In 1958, the family moved to a larger home in Bandra. Kamlu continued to enjoy the rich cultural and religious practices of her community.

[Kamlu audio excerpt]

You know in India, it's like Europe, different languages. It's not just one language. So, we'll have somebody speaking Gujarati or Marathi or a local language, a regional language. In our school, it was mandatory to learn the local language. So, we had to learn the national language, which was Hindi, and then the local language, it was Marathi. Then, we come home and we speak mother tongue, which is Sindhi, and then English is the medium in which we are taught all subjects because it's an international language. From a young age, we got familiar with all these languages and customs of different people, and then their dress, their uniform is different. We get to know what customs and what festivals they enjoy and we would exchange our food items with them. They'll exchange their snacks with us. It was very comfortable. Even the Muslims who lived there, they lived in harmony, even though they didn't visit each other. Muslims did not visit the Hindus, Hindus did not visit the Muslims, but they were cordial. They never quarreled or anything. They lived in peace and harmony.

Kamlu attended Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics, Churchgate, where she studied commerce, banking and finance. After graduating in 1969, she got a job at Indian

Overseas Bank. She became a Certified Associate of the Indian Institute of Bankers and an officer at Indian Overseas Bank.

Following their father, Kamlu's brother Ramesh immigrated to the United States in 1979 and settled in Queens. Kamlu came in 1981, and their mother followed in 1984. As was the case during their childhood, Ramesh and Kamlu received very little support from their father aside from his sponsorship once they settled in the United States.

First living in Brighton Beach, Kamlu acclimated to life in the U.S. She jokes about everything being supersized. Because she was raised on Hollywood depictions of America, she was surprised by rundown sections of New York City. She struggled to find work, with no American job experience and no computer training. She thinks that because she was so highly educated in India that American companies were reluctant to hire her for entry-level positions; they did not want to spend the effort on training her for a job that would be temporary.

"Tough times do not last, but tough people do!" has become Kamlu's mantra, as she has met difficulties head on. She continued her education, shifting to information technology. She went back to school and studied technology and computer programming.

[Kamlu audio excerpt]

I did work in very big Fortune 500 companies, like AIG, Citigroup, all Fortune 500 companies I have worked in.

Overall, Kamlu enjoyed corporate culture in America. She did, however, encounter gender-based discrimination in a job. After involving an employment discrimination lawyer, the situation improved. Then, in 2008, she was laid off during the financial crisis and decided on early retirement. It was a difficult transition for her, but she directed her attention to helping those in need.

In the 1980s, she had moved to East Brunswick, where her brother had settled. Once in New Jersey, she became involved in community service through a network of friends at the local Sathya Sai center, an organization dedicated to spirituality and service. Her civic involvement has continued to the present. She is active at Sathya Sai. She teaches English as a second language in Middlesex County. She volunteers at the soup kitchen in New Brunswick, Elijah's Promise, and in other local efforts, such as collecting and donating gifts during holiday seasons. She is actively involved in the East Brunswick Public Library and the East Brunswick Senior

Center, where she moderates classes, attends discussion groups, and writes letters for a pen pal program with local students.

She participates in the Indian American Club of Rossmoor in Monroe Township and in health and wellness initiatives at the YMCA.

[Kamlu audio excerpt]

I have to help somebody to feel good. Nobody knows your situation, but there are so many other people who are worse off than you, so count your blessings and move on. I'm so glad that I was able to uplift and bring cheer to some other people.

Over the years, Kamlu has connected with other South Asian community members and with Sindhi Hindus in particular. She is a regular at the Sadhu Vaswani Center, a temple in Central New Jersey. She serves as an officer at Agraj Seva Kendra, an Indian cultural organization in Middlesex County. There, she has been involved in efforts to bring arts to the community.

A student of Brahma Kumaris, a spiritual organization, she leads meditation and mindfulness sessions.

Over the COVID-19 pandemic, Kamlu has continued her own personal and spiritual development. Even though she suffers from macular degeneration in one eye, that has not stopped her. Initially impacted by the shutdown in the spring of 2020, Kamlu quickly adapted. She continued her education through online courses, learning spoken Sanskrit. She met many of her neighbors, who were working from home. She relied on community services, such as the Blue Delivery Program, in which the police delivered groceries. She connected with her brother, sister-in-law and niece, who would bring her fresh fruits and vegetables and other necessities. She focused on appreciating the little things and being grateful for what she has and what she does.

Kamlu attended daily meditation sessions via Zoom and continued her involvement in cultural and philanthropic organizations.

[Kamlu audio excerpt]

I have a good support system. You have to do the best you can, because change is the only thing that's going to happen all the time. Nothing is permanent except change. So, you have to accept it, this is what it is.

From Karachi to Mumbai to East Brunswick, Kamlu Gulrajani has lived her life with perseverance, compassion and generosity. Imprinted by her mother's experiences of being

ostracized and stigmatized, Kamlu has sought to connect with the communities around her and has sought to give back to help others.

Thank you for listening to the Rutgers Oral History Archives Podcast. I am Kate Rizzi.

**[Music Outro]**

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