The Goan East African affair of the past century is coming alive in London these days.

The city’s Nehru Centre has stepped back into history and is exhibiting some genuine Goan gems from Africa, unearthed by the Goan Association (UK), that is working on a project to record stories of Goans who lived in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi and Zanzibar. The stories and the exhibition focuses on the displacement, often abrupt, of the Goans in these countries and their resettlement mainly in the UK.

“The exhibition is the outcome of a two-year project in the UK funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, which reveals the oral histories of British Goans who came from East Africa. The exhibition forms a visual narrative of our Goan diasporic history, which is an integral part of the national narrative both of Britain and Goa,” project manager Selma Carvalho said. Carvalho is assisted by Cliff Pereira and Eddie Fernandes in the project.

The exhibits are mainly photographs sourced from the personal collections of Goan families that had once made East Africa their homes. Carvalho points out that some photographs from the nationalist Fr de Sousa’s family that was in Kenya, date back to the late 1800s. “There is also archival documentation, albeit copies of letters written by Goans in the early 1900s, advertisements of Goan shops opening in Nairobi in 1908, etc., all of which form part of the narrative,” Carvalho said.

The first record of a Goan going to Africa dates back 400 years. Domingos Soares Rebelo who in 1541 wrote the book ‘Goans abroad’ and in British lands, the cover of which features a portrait of the exhibition poster, said “A Goan named Heitor da Silva found in Malindi into the African wilderness with the plague of insects, followed by a revolt in the town, and primitive African man-eaters and reached the center of Ethiopia with no appropriate clothes, no shoes, only a pair of sandals, a beret, a rosemary, and a wooden crucifix and after months traveling reached his destination in May 1586 to rechristianize the Coptic Christians and bring them into the fold of Latin Church rites.”

Blast From The Past

An exhibition at London’s Nehru Centre focuses on the displacement of Goans in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi and Zanzibar, and their resettlement mainly in the UK.

The exhibits are mainly photographs sourced from the personal collections of Goan families that had once made East Africa their homes.

“After the independence of the African countries, the Goans who were working in the territories were relocated to other places, such as India or returned to their home country. The Goan communities in these colonies prospered in government service and in businesses until British rule ended in the 1960s,” said Maciel.

The major migration of Goans to Africa came in the 1800s and 1900s when people from the Portuguese colony of Goa crossed the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean and landed in the British African colonies. The Goan communities in these colonies prospered in government service and in businesses until British rule ended in the 1960s.

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The exhibition has brought back memories of their time in Africa to many Goans. Mervyn Maciel, who was born in Kenya and worked in the colonial government in Kenya but left for the UK after his post was ‘Africanised’, said, “I, like many of my vintage, am very much part of the story and many of the exhibits at the exhibition feature photographs. I provided. I was born in Kenya, went to school there as a child, later in London and finally landed back in Kenya following the tragic death of a loved one.”