



Kamala Harris:

History-Making US Vice President

James Roland



About the Author

James Roland started out as a newspaper reporter more than twenty-five years ago and then moved on to become an editor, magazine writer, and author.

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CHAPTER ONE

A Daughter of Immigrants

Kamala Harris was born on October 20, 1964, in Oakland, California, and spent the next few years growing up in a little yellow duplex in nearby Berkeley. Her parents had come to the United States to complete their educations and launch their careers. In 1958 her mother, Shyamala Gopalan, graduated early from college in India. She was only nineteen. She then left to pursue a master's degree in nutrition and endocrinology at the University of California, Berkeley. The brilliant, ambitious teenager had never set foot in the United States before arriving there to begin the next chapter of her life. A few years later, Kamala's father, Donald Harris, left his homeland of Jamaica for Berkeley to get his PhD in economics. Tall and intensely curious, Harris had grown fascinated by labor and economics working part time in his grandmother's general store and talking with workers on his other grandmother's sugarcane farm in the summers.

Gopalan and Harris met in the fall of 1962, at a time when the civil rights movement was gaining momentum in the San Francisco Bay Area and other parts of the country. Both were attending a meeting of the recently formed Afro-American Association. Harris was speaking to other students about social and racial issues in Jamaica and comparing them to

what he was seeing in the United States. Berkeley was fast becoming one of the centers of student activism, which was one of the reasons Harris wanted to continue his education there. When he was still in Jamaica, Harris read a news story about Berkeley student activists heading to the South to campaign for civil rights. “Further investigation of information about this university convinced me I had to go there,”⁵ he said in a 2020 interview in the *New York Times*.

Impressed by his talk that fall afternoon, Gopalan went up to Harris after the meeting and started asking questions. “This was all very interesting to me, and I daresay, a bit charming,” Harris recalled in the *New York Times* article. “At a subsequent meeting, we talked again, and at the one after that. The rest is now history.”⁶ The couple married in 1963, with Gopalan rejecting Indian culture’s custom of arranged marriages and following her heart. A year later Kamala was born. In 1967 the couple had a second daughter, Maya, who grew up to be an accomplished lawyer like her older sister, as well as one of Kamala’s top campaign advisers.

Early Exposure to Social Justice

Throughout much of the tumultuous 1960s, the couple participated in protests and rallies, confronting issues such as the racist apartheid government in South Africa and economic and racial injustice in the United States. And as the two marched with others down the tree-lined sidewalks of Berkeley, there was Kamala, too young to understand what all the activity was about but already hearing messages about social justice. At an August 2020 campaign appearance, Kamala Harris said:

My parents would bring me to protests strapped tightly in my stroller. My mother, Shyamala, raised my sister, Maya, and me to believe that it was up to us and every generation of Americans to keep on marching. She’d tell us, “Don’t sit around and complain about things; do something.” So

I did something. I devoted my life to making real the words carved in the United States Supreme Court: Equal justice under law.⁷

The family moved for a brief period to the Midwest, first to Illinois in 1966 and then to Wisconsin. In Wisconsin, Harris and Gopalan took on teaching and research positions at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. But by then their marriage was in trouble. Gopalan decided to return to California in 1969 and take her daughters with her. Not long afterward, Harris became a professor of economics at Stanford University, less than 50 miles (80 km) south of Berkeley. In 1972 the couple divorced, and Gopalan retained full custody of the girls.

“My mother, Shyamala, raised my sister, Maya, and me to believe that it was up to us and every generation of Americans to keep on marching.”⁷

—Kamala Harris

For a brief time after the custody battle, Harris saw little of his daughters. But as time went on, Kamala and Maya vis-

ited their father during summer vacations and other times through the years. He occasionally took the girls to visit his hometown in Jamaica and see the little store where he had helped his grandmother many years before. The girls explored the same hills and trails their father had hiked as a boy and got to know the wide, extended family that always welcomed them with open arms every time they returned to the island.

Kamala Goes to School

During this period of marital turbulence, Kamala reached the age when many kids start kindergarten. The year 1969 was also a time when the racial justice issues of the adult world were spilling over into the schools. Neighborhoods in many parts of the country, including Berkeley, were largely segregated, meaning that their schools were, too. Schools tended to be mostly White or mostly Black. With hopes of improving race relations and mak-

ing cities and towns more integrated, school districts started busing programs that would send Black students into predominantly White schools and vice versa.

Kamala was a member of the second class to be integrated at her elementary school. To help fulfill the city's efforts to desegregate its elementary schools, Kamala and her classmates were bused across town to Thousand Oaks Elementary School. Each bus transporting kids across the city was labeled with a color and an animal. Harris rode "the red rooster" from her working-class neighborhood to the more affluent north Berkeley Hills area. "I only learned later that we were part of a national experiment in desegregation with working-class black children from the flatlands being bused in one direction and wealthier white children from the Berkeley hills bused in the other,"⁸ Harris wrote in her 2019 memoirs, *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey*.



In 2004, Kamala Harris is sworn in as San Francisco's district attorney, as her mother, Shyamala Gopalan (center) looks on.

Though she had a longer bus ride than she would have had otherwise, she did not mind. She and her friends sang songs and played hand-clapping games. Harris looks back at her first few years of school fondly and holds a special teacher dear to her heart. In a 2019 interview with the Berkeley-side digital newspaper, Harris said:

Growing up, the first question asked of me at the dinner table was, “What did you learn at school today?” Thanks to my beloved first-grade teacher, Mrs. Frances Wilson at Thousand Oaks Elementary School in Berkeley, I always had an answer I was anxious to share. Mrs. Wilson had a profound effect on all of us and was deeply committed to her students, a diverse group, ranging from kids growing up in housing projects to the children of people working at the university.⁹

Today there is a painted image of Kamala Harris on a playground wall at Thousand Oaks, alongside portraits of Malala Yousafzai, Serena Williams, and Anne Frank.

Race and Identity

Being raised by parents of different races and cultures meant Kamala grew up with a variety of influences. Her mother took the girls to a predominantly Black Baptist church, where Kamala sang in the youth choir, but also to a Hindu temple. In the day care they attended in the afternoons while Gopalan worked, Kamala and Maya were surrounded by posters of Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth—three remarkable Black women from history. The day care sat on the first floor of an apartment building in Oakland. On the top floor was the apartment where Gopalan and her daughters moved after the divorce.

And in that new home, Kamala learned much about the Hindu faith and Indian culture and language from her mother. When Gopalan was frustrated with work or speaking affectionately to her daughters, the words were in Tamil, the language she grew up speaking. The words with the deepest emotions were spoken in

The Woman Whose Influence Mattered Most

Kamala Harris's career as a strong-willed leader willing to break barriers is a reflection of her mother. When Shyamala Gopalan graduated from college in the 1950s, she hoped to embark on a career in science but opportunities for women in that field were limited in India during those years. So Gopalan applied to the University of California, Berkeley. There she obtained advanced degrees in nutrition and endocrinology.

Although Gopalan was a petite woman—she was just 5 feet (152.4 cm) tall—Harris has always viewed her mother as a giant. Stories about Gopalan being denied a teaching job that was given to a less-qualified man and being mocked for her thick Indian accent resonated with Harris. During the August 2020 Democratic National Convention, Harris listed several famous women who had broken color and gender barriers in the past. And then she added, “There’s another woman . . . whose shoulders I stand on. And that’s my mother, Shyamala Gopalan Harris.” Gopalan died of cancer in 2009, never getting to see Kamala become a senator or vice president. But others see Gopalan in Harris. Family friend Sharon McGaffie says Harris’s achievements reflect Gopalan’s determination and “that strength that she’s fighting for something, that she’s never intimidated.”

Quoted in Rikha Sharma Rani, “The Woman Who Led Kamala Harris to This Moment,” *The Atlantic*, October 25, 2020. www.theatlantic.com.

Quoted in Casey Tolan, “Kamala Harris: How Immigrants Shaped Her Life,” *San Jose (CA) Mercury News*, February 10, 2019. www.mercurynews.com.

the language closest to Gopalan’s heart. Growing up, Kamala often wore Indian jewelry and learned many Indian traditions. One in particular, the breaking of coconuts at a Hindu temple, is said to bring good luck. When Kamala was running for California attorney general in 2010, she called an aunt in India and asked her to smash coconuts at the temple Kamala had visited with her grandfather. Her aunt complied—and Kamala won that election. “All my friends were Black and we got together and cooked Indian food and painted henna on our hands, and I never felt uncomfortable with my cultural background,”¹⁰ she says.

“All my friends were Black and we got together and cooked Indian food and painted henna on our hands, and I never felt uncomfortable with my cultural background.”¹⁰

—Kamala Harris



Maya Harris (left), also a talented attorney, served as her older sister's campaign adviser as Harris pursued the nomination as the Democratic presidential candidate.

Although their mother was very proud of her Indian roots, it was clear from the time Kamala and Maya were young that society would view them as Black. “My mother understood very well she was raising two Black daughters,” Harris wrote in her 2018 autobiography. “She knew that her adopted homeland would see Maya and me as Black girls, and she was determined to make sure we would grow into confident Black women.”¹¹

At times, Harris has opted to avoid questions or conversations about her multiracial identity and what label she should wear. When asked how she describes herself, Harris often says simply, “American.” But part of Harris’s American story includes a chapter in Canada, too. When she was twelve, she and her sister moved from sunny California to snowy Montreal when their mother was offered a cancer research position and professorship at McGill University.

The Montreal Years

In Montreal, Kamala wasted little time in picking up the activist mantle from her parents. The apartment building they lived in had strict rules. One such rule prohibited playing on the lawn. Kamala and

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IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF KAMALA HARRIS

1964

Kamala Harris is born on October 20 in Oakland, California, to Shyamala Gopalan and Donald Harris.

1976

After her parents divorce, Harris moves with her mother and younger sister, Maya, to Montreal, where Gopalan takes a position as a professor and cancer researcher at McGill University.

1986

Harris graduates from Howard University with bachelor's degrees in economics and political science.

1989

Harris graduates from the University of California, Hastings College of the Law.

1990

Harris is admitted to the State Bar of California and becomes a deputy district attorney in Alameda County, California.

1998

Harris is hired as an assistant district attorney in San Francisco, eventually becoming chief of the Career Criminal Unit.

2000

Harris takes on a new role at San Francisco City Hall overseeing the Child and Family Services Division, which focuses on child abuse and neglect cases.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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