

MR MOHAMMED SIRAJ

Can you begin by telling what you were doing around the time when the Bengalis started to arrive?

Ok I came to this country in 1966 from Tanzania in Africa. I was studying at the time, did my A levels here. Then I went to Sunderland to do pharmacy. That was in 1973 when I got qualified. Then I did my pre reg here, which is working under a pharmacist. Then I qualified as a fully Qualified Pharmacist. Working in the western area since then.

What interactions have u had with the Bengali community in the area?

In the Bengali community in the area, initially when they came what I first noticed was that they could not speak English at all. Things have changed now. At that time there was a big big problem, communication. **(and how did people navigate the language barrier)** They tend to stick together for that purpose. That's why they used to stay contrary to wherever there Bengali people where and they used to frequently visit the shop where there was someone who can speak to them in their language or talk to them in a way they could understand speak some bit of Hindi or Urdu. That's why they used to go them shops rather than

So you run a pharmacy in this area, so what sort of things did Bengali people come to you with when they came to your pharmacy?

All sorts of problems. Instead of just being a pharmacist to them I was a social worker as well. They used to come to me with all sorts of problems. **(Because they can communicate with you)** Because they can communicate with me. **(What sort of problems?)** Any kind of help. From immigration, personal problems, even if they wanted to borrow some money they will come to me as well. **(what did you say to them)** I would sometimes lend them money. **(And if they came with immigration or something like that where did you send them what did you do?)** To the right appropriate places.

How has the Bengali community changed over the period from the very beginning?

A major change which I have noticed is that the youngsters who have grown up and they can speak English. The communication has changed. The parents can communicate through the children now. Which is better and the outlook has changed as well now. The kids have starting doing well now. I've noticed that. Before the parents were not interested in study. They wanted them to join the business. But now I see their progressing in different fields. Which is for the better of the community?

What do you think where the aspirations for the early community?

The aspirations for the early community was to make money and send it home.

In contrast now what would you say the aspirations are?

Aspirations are I think to mingle with the community this is their place. **(So they came here to make money and send it back home)** Absolutely that was their idea behind it, their home was Bangladesh they never considered England as home. But now the second generation are thinking more as this as their home and Bangladesh as a holiday.

What struggles and obstacles do you remember people facing when they were new migrants?

Major problem was the language and the lack of communication and that lead to more problems. **(How about any cultural differences?)** There were cultural differences but they used to overcome them with being together they could go to each other's places or minor community centres.

What kind of cultural problems did they have?

I did not witness any cultural problems as such because they always used to be together with their friends and families rather than. When they came they were always with their friends or family.

What about employment? What sort of things did people work in?

They normally used to work initially in restaurants but when their kids started growing up, they started applying to different places. I can remember in the 90's I can't remember the exact year. Very early on a Bengali girl came to me and applied for a job. She was wearing a hijab. In the 70s, which was very rare and she said "do you mind" and at that time there were a lot more English customers. She thought they might object and I said "no not to me it doesn't matter" and I employed her. **(She could speak English?)** She could speak English she was born here and brought up here.

How do you think life was different from the men in the community to the women?

Men were the bread earners so they used to be out. Women were looking after the kids and they literally ran the homes. So I used to see more women rather than men because they will come to the shop with their prescriptions or buy food or milk for the babies. Again the language was a major problem. Hardly anyone could speak English at the time.

Where ther any tensions between the different communities that used to live here?

There were a few. Not as much as there are now to be honest because as you know since these problems of terrorism have started its tense more now than it used to be.

What different communities were based around here? What where the dominant communities?

The dominant, west Indian there were quite a few of them, Bangladeshis where there and then English and Irish. There were a few Irish here as well.

How did the different communities get a long side by side?

Bengalis tend to keep to themselves rather than mingle with other communities that I have noticed. So there was not that much interaction with the different communities there.

What was Westminster like at the time during the 70s?

Westminster at the time seemed different. It was... but then again the culture has changed. In the 70s Friday and Saturday were the main days for the market here at that time there were no big Tescos and Sainsburys. Come late 70s early 80s the shopping patterns changed. The big supermarkets opened up here and the people just drive there and buy things. The importance of the market went down so it became less busy. So it's more to do with cultural changes heavy changes these things happen. Funny enough the whole circle has come around now where the supermarkets are struggling now. If you look the Tescos are struggling the AZdas are struggling because things have turned round again because people don't want to go there and buy. They want to buy when they need things or they want to support small shops. This just happens. The cycle just goes on.

What do you think lies ahead for the Bengali community now?

I think they are progressing. Kids are especially doing well but some of them obviously have gone the wrong way but that can't be helped. But the majority from that I see have done very well and I think that's good for the community.

Where there any Bengalis that you knew particularly well, that you were close to at any point?

I was close to quite a few of them. The majority of them I still know them now so I became quite friendly with them.

In your pharmacy you employed a few people, did you feel like that helped the community? Was that one of your agendas?

One of the agendas was to help wherever I could with this community because they will not get a job anywhere else.

Most of the people you employed where female Bengali women. Was this their first job?

Most of the time this was their first job.

Did they face any barriers while working?

Not really. I was quite opened minded. I helped them. I trained them. So no problems.

Is there anything else you would like to say about the Bengali community? Anything we have not covered.

I think we covered everything just about. One thing I really appreciate is that Bengalis have always supported me right through and vice versa I have tried to help them wherever I could. What I would like to see more is the mentality of children, I know most of them are going university but there are children who do not want to do that and I don't understand why. They need drumming in to them that education is the main thing. Still there are certain parents that want their son to go to the restaurant or somewhere like that, just try to change that it will be better. And that I think lies with your dad. Whenever they will get together in the community centres like when you have a function or anything you should really drum into them that education is the future.