

PRAFULLCHANDRA AMBALAL AMIN

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Interviewer: Urmala Jassal

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

Family member: F (Family member listening to the interview)

00:00 I I was going to ask you what your full name is, and how long you've been living here?

00:07 R In here, or in Birmingham?

00:10 I In the UK.

00:11 R Oh. I came in 1964, as a teacher. And since November 1964, I've been living here; first in London, then in Kent, and then for a year I did go to North Wales for post-graduation in Linguistics. And then I came to Birmingham in 1972, and since then, until today, I've been here. Living here.

00:44 I Tell me, where were you born, and what was life like where you were born?

00:52 R Well, I was born, obviously, in India, in a big city, Ahmedabad. Er, I grew up there. I did my first graduation in Old Bombay, or New Mumbai, then did my second graduation in Gujarat. Taught there for four and a half years, as a lecturer of English. And then I came in 1964 on an employment voucher, and worked some odd job for some three, four months, and then I had my teaching job in Kent for seven years. And then I came to Birmingham.

01:44 I What was life like in India?

01:47 R In India then? It depends upon what you are, and where you live. I myself was a well-studied chap, with good qualifications, so I did not have a problem of making my two ends meet. But if you think of India in general,

in those days, we were, in a way a threshold of the expecting new fruits of independence, because it was just 10 years. And the situation was very fluid. People had very high expectations. And comparatively, I think that we were ethically and morally better, and at least less quarrelling than at present, in India. That's my experience. I go there every year now, four or five months. I live here. So I've got good comparisons, and I'm happy, and just a simple man watching the two or three countries.

03:11 I What about life at home, and your family? What was that like in India?

03:16 R In India, we come from, in a way, a big community, Patel community. And er my father was a primary school teacher. Not very rich, but not completely poor. But with working hard, he could run our house; and with the mother's big economic hand, in terms of running the household, we were just fairly comfortable. And thank God that they gave us, me and my brother, a good education, sacrificing themselves. We were just two brothers. And then, as soon as I got my first degree, I just wanted to be independent, and free my parents from their responsibilities, and, maintaining us. And there the story goes on, in India, you know/ And then, because I was a bit ambitious, and I had studied English language and literature, and I wanted to see, obviously, this new country, where those English language and literature. So I came in '64. I was a bit lucky.

04:47 I What was life like, when you came to the UK in '64?

04:52 R A bit strange, and not very happy. Those were the days, Urmala, when the newspapers and news media could advertise that, "We want tenants, but not dogs, and not coloured." It was such an uncomfortable situation in '64. But the situation then got better and better. But I remember those days, where if you wanted to rent a house, or rent a room, they had a choice- not we had a choice, they had a choice. But then things moved, and when I went to Kent, it was so comfortable, and in spite of the working class area in Sittingbourne and Sheerness, people were very, very welcoming to me and my wife. Those were the happiest days, in Kent. I still remember. And here, when I came, I find a different life that I live, almost as if I'm in India. And in Kent, I could hardly remember who I was. I could not remember my Diwali. I could remember Christmas very well. I enjoyed and celebrated Christmas more than my Diwali. But then, here, now I again go back to my Diwali. I celebrate Christmas, in terms of, it's what you call, Christmas celebrations, and some spiritual inspiration that you get. But quite apart from that, I'm a mixed person. And once, I think in the court,

when a judge asked me, I said, "Don't call me an Indian, call me British, brown British." And he had a smile on his face, in those days.

07:14 I Tell me why you came to Birmingham, and where you went?

07:19 R (Laughter) That's a long story, because I was selected for a senior lecturer's job in Saudi Arabia. I forget the-

07:34 F Jeddah.

07:35 R Jeddah. King Abdullah's University. And everything had gone very well through British Council, and I had several interviews, which I passed. But at the end of, what you call, coming, my actual going there, I had a letter from British Council; the Saudi Arabian government did not approve my religious denomination. That's a sad story, but I had this second job lined up, and that's how I came to Birmingham. And I'm comfortable here.

08:19 I What was the place that you came to in Birmingham?

08:24 R It was a language centre, and I was a peripatetic teacher, going to different schools for various immigrant pupils who needed special attention into speaking English and writing English. It was a specialist job. So I was just moving from school to school on a daily basis.

08:59 I Did you come to Sparkhill, or was it another area of Birmingham?

09:06 R Well, again, it depends upon, you know how you get married to somebody you do not know. It's an accident. Similarly, when I came, I was looking for a rented place. I had some friends, and they helped me. I put up in Sparkbrook for about nine months, until I bought my own house. Because I had a property in Kent, so for a sort of short gap, I had to stay in Sparkbrook. And I also came to know, a very heavily Asian-populated area, Sparkbrook and Sparkhill, even then. It was a changing situation. I remember when I moved in, it was a mixed area in the sense of not Asians, but Jews and Irish people, and English. Three communities lived there. And gradually it increased, Asians came into businesses, into buying properties. And Jews disappeared. English people they sold their businesses. And until I came, about, shall I say, 1980, '85, it was still a mixed area, where all the communities were almost in the same proportion. Then it increased to mainly Asians, Indians and Pakistanis. And now if you see, in the coming-well, in the last, what, about five or six years in Sparkbrook, towards the

city side, it has again regenerated the area, and Somalis came. And I am glad that that run-down area is once again coming up. But it is now, Sparkhill side, is a very heavily Asian, and I would say Pakistani area, because even most of the Indian businesses have stopped doing business there. There were three or four, I remember, very famous gold jewellery business people, who were there; now they just stopped their business. And er most of the simple Pakistani shops have come, but I understand the businesses still are going well, and people just like. But if you ask me, it is becoming exclusively a sort of immigrant area. So that is a matter of concern to probably the politicians, not to me. I'm retired.

12:22 I You've seen a lot of changes in the area, because you described some communities that lived there that aren't really talked about any more, or associated, like Irish and Jews, in that area, at that time. What other changes have you seen, other than population?

12:40 R I was also a member of Rotary Club. And er a couple of my Irish friends told me that probably since 1945 to '60, this is a time- or perhaps a little bit, until we came, put it this way, Asians- they attacked Irish people. And my friend told me, "Peter, you do not know how much they hated us, how much they were non-cooperative with us, because of this Northern Ireland situation. And you have done us a favour," he said, "because what they did to us, they've stopped doing that to us, and now it is you." So that was a time. But gradually, things- social changes are very slow, and there are many upheavals. But a time comes when things level up. So that was a time when things moved from Jews and Irish to Asians, and now it is an exclusively Asian area. To me, it is a matter of concern, but I and you can't help it. Things will move, it has got its natural way to develop.

14:18 R In those days, we wanted to set up a club, Sparkhill Social Club, I remember. And even though they were very polite, and nice and civil, there was a strong opposition for us, the Asians, to start a social club on Walford Road, and they did everything possible to stop us. In fact, we did not get the licence first time, but we had to go and appeal. And eventually we got through. So in that way, it was difficult time. But gradually, we came, we started businesses, and there was a new prosperity, and the old ways of English life was mixing with the new life of the Asians.

15:24 R And if you see religion-wise, obviously it was exclusively Christian area. There was no temple, no mosque. Now, if you see now, this Sparkhill, Sparkbrook area, Highgate area, you'll find that in my own short life of say

30, 40 years, Ram Mandir on Walford Road; Laxmi Narayan Temple on Warwick Road; at that time, Swaminarayan Temple was here on Ivory Road; and BPM, Birmingham Pragati Mandal had a Krishna Temple. So now, three or four religious places of the Hindus are well-established. And at the same time, if you see the Highgate Mosque is a central city mosque, and on Golden Hillock Road, if you see, again, a very big mosque. Now, that picture is completely different to a Victorian, or say 1940. And if he came back to Birmingham, he would be shocked, "Is this Birmingham?" So even religiously, the place has considerably changed. It had gone down, and coming up. It has once again gone down, and coming up. So people have always elasticity, and what you call, some instinct to survive, and again go back to their prosperity.

17:15 R There were banks, if you- I think in those days, there were NatWest, Barclays, Lloyds, and even Midland Bank, yes. All the banks were there. Now, banks gradually disappeared. Building societies came into being in Sparkhill area, and because I myself was a building society agent, I'm glad to say that when Halifax started agency with me, ours was one of the biggest building society agencies in the whole country. We were out of the first four or five, and a couple of times we were number one. That much business Sparkhill area produced, because Irish people, good savers of money, and they couldn't even drink away their money, that's a different thing. Asians, again, were good money savers. And banks and building societies love money. It was a chance, what I call given to me, and I found myself very happy to make the business successful, and area successful.

18:48 I The banks, and people's behaviour, economically; how would you say now, economically, the area has changed?

19:07 R Sparkhill area is still a middle-class, or even, say, lower middle-class area. Sparkbrook, in a way, as I mentioned, I'm glad, which was completely run down, is coming up by some governmental help. But the Somalis, to me, have done something good. Probably you might know that Mr Lloyd set up his bank, and he lived just behind the old Lloyds Bank in Sparkbrook there. So it has got its own history. And I always used to say to my Lloyds Bank manager about Mr Lloyd, that it's a pity that he didn't do anything as a memento of the Lloyd's Bank history there, even though he lived, I think, on the Farm Road, or just behind there. So there you are.

20:19 I In terms of the Halifax, could you tell us about your memories? How long you were the agent there, and how things changed?

20:30 I I was with the Halifax for almost 30 years. In 1980 I got the agency, at the end of '80. And again, I remember unhappy incident, that when they were talking about giving me an agency there, I had my solicitor friend, he called me and he said, "Peter, I know the Halifax establishment. They would not like an Asian or a black man to be the Halifax agent. If you like, we can take the agency on our name, solicitor's firm, and then you run the business." And then I said to my friend, "Ian, it doesn't matter whether I get my agency or not. When they call me for interview-" and for a lunch, in fact- "if they don't want to give, fair enough. Because I would not change my face. I make my two ends meet. I'm happy with what I am earning. So if they want to give me the agency, and if they want a business here, then they will have to take me as their agent." And, Urmala, what I liked, and what I found a happy shock, was the manager, when he talked to me, we discussed quite a few things. And he was very happy to give me the job there and then. And I told him, also, because he had a very bad reputation of being very strict, no-one can cross him; I told him, "Look here, if you want me to be a quiet person, I'm not a quiet person, not to give my view. But one thing I assure you, Jim, that having given my view, and you take a decision, I will not come in your way, and I will do exactly what you want me to do. But if you want me to be quiet, and shut up, then you better don't give me the agency." But he was quite happy, so there was- these were the days, I remember, that you have some impression of some people, and when you actually meet them, it turns out to be completely opposite.

23:28 I What would you say are your happiest memories of Sparkhill, and the whole area?

23:38 R There were two or three things. One is gradually, the Indian society came into a good what you call financial position, by doing self-help and working hard. They brought their culture. For example, at the moment, there are raas garbas , you know. In those days, there were hardly a few places where raas garbas could be played. Now, you find that there are various places where that culture of dance and music is going on. That's one thing.

24:25 R I remember, one happy incident, and unhappy incident in a way. If you remember, in 1993, or I forget the year, when that Ayodhya mosque problem had created some tension in the local communities here. And when I say 'local communities', it means Hindus and Muslims, and Indians and Pakistanis. And at that time, Geoffrey Dear, he was the Chief Constable of the West Midlands area. And I'm happy to say that he invited me, and I

think Deputy Chief Constable, I forget his name. But because I was on various committees, Sparkhill Police Liaison committees, there was another committee- there was another three or four committees. And at that time, they invited me, and we worked together, in terms of making sure that we do not have communal riots, (Phone rings) and...

25:43 R That I felt very much satisfied that the communal problems, and what you call a danger of getting some unhappy incidents, so riots and some destruction, did not happen, because of the police, us, and Pakistani community leaders and some Hindu leaders, who, at one stage were at loggerheads. But still, it worked well, and at least in Sparkbrook, Sparkhill area, we did not have that problem.

26:31 R In fact, I still remember a small incident that in Shakespeare Street, or somewhere there, there is a small mosque, and they had some fire problem. And obviously people thought that it was the job of some antisocial elements. What I did was, I went to the committee of the mosque, and first of all I gave my condolences and sympathy that this thing happened. I assured them that, "If we find anyone from our community, we will let you know, and we will let the police know. So please, make sure that this doesn't grow into a communal problem." Later on, it found that it was their own, some dissident group that had played the mischief. So to the best of my memory, except some graffiti some people had written on Henley Street BPM Krishna Temple, we did not have any single problem. And I had some great satisfaction, becoming a part of playing what you call a pacifying role.

28:07 I That's wonderful.