

PIALI RAY
01/12/2014

Interviewer: David Richardson

Interviewer: I
Respondent: R

00:05 I Ok Piali Ray OBE, can you tell us a little bit about your early childhood years, where you were born and when etc?

00:17 R I was born in Calcutta, that's in east, er the West Bengal State in the east of India, eastern part of India and I grew up in a very bustling city. I went to a convent school, Queen of the Missions Convent School which was run by Irish nuns. So got a taste of Britain from those days. We had to study history of Great Britain as part of our curriculum in those days and we had moral science and bible history. So those were early childhood days. Then I went to Loretta College and did my graduation from there and then I did my masters in history from Calcutta University. Soon after that I came to England.

01:28 I Can you tell me a little more about what life was like growing up in India, what kind of early memories do you have?

01:36 R Early memories are very much surrounded by a lot of cultural activities. My parents were very supportive of extra-curricular activities, education and music and dance and painting or writing poetry were balanced in my family life. And there were regular sort of soirees we call them majlis when friends would gather and there would be a lot of singing and dancing in the family home. I was very much part of the cultural scene from a very early age. I was learning from some eminent dance teachers in Calcutta. I'm a student of Uday Shankar Indian Culture Centre learned from Amala Shankar and specialised in Bharatanatyam in classical dance from Mrs Thankamani Kutty. So these are all very well established dance schools of the city. But other than that, there were many dance productions I was part of, very much a part of the dance and music scenes. So my friends and growing up years very much surrounded by this. Of course there was always the pressure of doing well in education, that's very much part of the Indian culture, and yea I loved it, loved it.

03:26 I Did you find that balance hard between education and your passion for dance and for other cultural activities?

03:35 R Not really, not really. I had to do long hours, I remember my mother you know getting me up like four thirty/five in the morning, where I was getting up early mornings to study when exams were on, so yes I did some long

hours, did some evenings of rehearsals and if there were studies to do, we did that. But that was how life was, life was very much just that education and cultural activities. So it was balanced in that way.

04:17 I And did you have any jobs or any other extra-curricular activities outside of your studies when you were at University and college?

04:32 R No, my mother used to run a small school called Flowers Corner which was in, where we lived, a very small school, so a lot of the times I would be teaching them dance and music to perform or be part of those schools other activities. Other than that there was no time, very busy, either going for training or going for rehearsals and school and college and university and friends, yes.

05:14 I And when did you complete your masters?

05:18 R I completed my masters in 198...I dunno. 1978/79.

05:30 I Ok so there was a short gap in between you finishing your Masters and moving to the UK?

05:36 R Yes I also did an Education Degree, Bachelor of Education after doing my masters because I was.. then I took up a job, a teaching job in Loreto School and it would make sense to have an education sort of teaching education degree like PGCE in this country. So I did that and I got the results of my exams after I came here in 82 and I did very well, yes I got a first.

06:18 I (laughs) Very good. So let's talk a little bit more about your move to the UK. What was it that brought you here and can you describe a little bit about the moving process?

06:33 R My husband, was, he did his masters in science from Birmingham University in sort of mid to late 70's, then he went back to India, and then he was offered a PhD, to do a PhD, so he came back. By that time we were married, so I came with him in that sense. I remember he came a little early, he came in January 82 and I came later because I had a lot of performances and I wanted to finish my teaching assignments in the school and so I thought I'd come a little later and it kept getting delayed because there would always be another performance coming up and my brother who I was part of several dance companies, they would just say "*just do this one and then you go*" and because I so loved performing and so loved being part of that scene, that I did stay on. Eventually my husband had to kind of threaten me that if you don't come by end of April, there was some change in the NHS system or something that would create problems later, then I came. It was a very, it was in May 1982, it was a very rainy summer in Birmingham and it was a huge change for me from the bustling busy carefree life in Calcutta to a

rather quiet university town, city of Birmingham, I didn't know anybody other than my husband.

08:36 I Which area did you move to?

08:41 R We were staying in student accommodation, oversea student accommodation on Hagley Road which was a good thing because, I realise now, it was one of the busiest parts of the city, so it was just besides Strathallan Hotel and it was run by Friends Association and I think, they used to provide accommodation for overseas students with family, so it was like a nice bedsit accommodation.

09:15 I And were you in that area for particularly long?

09:19 R I think we were there till, for about two years at least, two to three years, then we moved out and we moved to Bournville, the Cadbury's estate, again we had a small flat, we had two rooms instead of one room and yea, we were there. It was when my husband was in university, Birmingham University so we were always trying to see where we could be close to the university and erm yea, so we stayed there for quite a long time.

09:58 I Did you pine for home in many ways or did you sort of establish any links with the Indian community here? Did you find it sort of easy to settle in to integrate?

10:13 R It wasn't overly easy to start with no, because as I said I didn't know anybody at all, other than my husband so, I know what I did. One day after about a week of just staying at home, counting, I used to count cars which is a bit sad actually. I used to look out of the window and I used to count red cars until someone later told me that red was the most popular colour that year, so there was very little for me to do. Then after about as I said, a couple of weeks I just went off to the Indian, someone said that there's an assistant Indian High Commissioners office in Birmingham and I thought ok why don't I just go and I did. I went to their offices and I managed to actually meet the assistant High Commissioner at that time, Mr Gant who saw me talking to the receptionist and saying that I don't want to talk to anybody else other than the Assistant High Commissioner, what's the point, and basically I went and told him I don't know anybody, these are my qualifications and I want to work. I want to work. And because I had done a secretarial course as well in Calcutta, yea I did that, I did do a secretarial course and I did a bit of French in Calcutta in between my studies.

11:59 R Actually very kindly and very generously he gave me a job at the Indian High Commission, as a consular assistant and I started pretty soon after. So I started working, which was good, that was that little office was like a little bit of India actually, so all my colleagues were Indian, most of them had come from India, some were from this country, and every lunchtime they warmed

up roti and curry and saag. The office smelt of lovely food and they would be playing Hindi, you know, Indian songs, so it was a little bit of India I felt. I felt very comfortable there, I thought ok I can handle this. The rest, when you step out it was very lingual because I didn't know anybody. But after a while you start enjoying it and you start getting excited and adventurous that you are in new country but your finding your feet and you're getting to know people and having a profession, being in a job, all of that is quite exciting, so, and gradually I started to know more people, and in 82 it was also, Festival of India was going on, a festival in the UK, a promotional festival from the Indian Government, coincidental, and I was asked to be part of that and so I joined one of the dance groups touring at that time from India.

13:57 R So that again opened up a new world for me and that's how in a way, the dance career in this country started for me, because when I performed with them and the audience were told that the rest of the company were going back but Piali, who just did the Bharatanatyam performance, actually now lives in Birmingham. So straight after the performances I would have audience members coming and saying will you teach us, can you teach us, so suddenly I had an interest from people to learn from me, so I said ok why not. So I started a class in the front room of where we lived on Hagley Road, moved sofas back and started a class, which absolutely grew exponentially, until I had to look for other spaces because, suddenly you know, a class of four was like twenty in two week's time. You know word of mouth most of it, and so that's when I started looking for space and someone told me of Midlands Art Centre, Mac where we are now in the 80's, a very very different building, different setup, and also directed me to Sparkhill to the Adult Education Centre who had rooms, and it was a centre where there were more Indian communities were there, South Asian communities, and so people advised me that if you start a class there, there will be a lot of students who will join it and that's how I started a class at the Adult Education Centre on Stratford Road.

16:00 I You're very good at pre-empting my questions (laughs). So when did you start the teaching at Sparkhill?

16:12 R In Sparkhill, I would say, around 84, yea, around 84 because I started teaching at Mac, it may have been 83. In 82 sort of around June/July I started teaching here, but they already had a Bharatanatyam teacher Chitrleka Bolar, so I offered a different style of dance, Indian creative and folk, but because there was also interest in learning Bharatanatyam from me, being the classical form, so I started the class on Stratford Road, which was a bigger syllabus, teaching Bharatanatyam classical as well as creative and folk, so I had two classes in the city.

17:04 I And how did the classes sort of come to tuition, who did you kind of speak to in getting it set up in Sparkhill?

- 17:19 R Right. I went and spoke to the centre manager who used to rent the spaces, and I hired the room actually from them on Saturdays, I started my classes from ten til two every Saturday, and advertised but not that much, it was still very word of mouth that was actually working because marketing skills wasn't there, so it was very much just telling people I'm starting to teach if you want to come or the student themselves would do that, so that's how the class grew. And it grew quite fast, within a month, a couple of months, I had about fifty students I was teaching at different levels, some very young, some a little older, and some mature students as well. There were not that many classes running in Birmingham at that time, and because I was offering a range of styles, there was a lot of interest.
- 18:43 I So would you say, did a lot of your students come from further afield in Birmingham or would you put it down to the fact that Sparkhill had a strong close knit kind of community?
- 18:56 R There was definitely a group coming from the local area, there were a lot of Gujarati families there at the time, so a lot of the Gujarati girls came, but they were people that would travel. I knew there were people who actually travelled from Wolverhampton, the Edgbaston area, some people came from Bearwood. I'm trying to remember my students at the time, and it was also a very mixed group, there were a lot of not just Asian students but a lot of white girls were learning as well, so it was from all over really Birmingham, Solihull, yea.
- 19:40 I So tell me a little bit more about the buildings that they took place in, there was the Sparkhill Adult Education Centre which was the Sparkhill Institute before and there was the Sparkhill Baths. Tell me a little bit more about inside, were they fit for purpose?
- 19:56 R Yea well the Adult Education Centre gave me a classroom basically, and, they moved the furniture aside and sometimes when it was too small, and on the Saturday mornings we tended to spill over, so we were in the corridor as well, but there was hardly anybody using, we were on the third floor of the building, and there was also quite a nice big hall on the first floor. The building is still there isn't it, so probably still functioning in that way, so we would use the hall at times if there was a big rehearsal happening and I needed more space, otherwise if I was teaching different groups at different times, it was in the classroom upstairs and I remember on the Saturday, same time as me, there was a Gujarati language class taking place on the ground floor and Anju Shah? was teaching there and she was very very active in the community so through her I got to do a lot more about the other communities as well and the Gujarati community, yes.
- 21:15 I And did you say you taught at the swimming baths as well?
- 21:18 R Yes, oh yes, what happened is the centre used to close down during school

holidays in summer, so I moved the classes and I went away and spoke to the swimming baths and they had a room alongside the bath which was ok except it was carpeted, so we couldn't take the carpet off. That was a bit of a drawback but we continued and the students were happy to continue which was alongside a carpark and so every summer we moved the class to the swimming baths, that's what we did.

21:56 I Ok and we'll talk a little bit more about Sparkbrook in a bit but I think first let's talk a little bit more about your students. You said they were quite a mixed age range, but in terms of their skill level, did they come in as pure beginners, or were some a bit more skilled coming in?

22:20 R No they were all beginners, they were all very very beginners, and at that time the Bollywood phenomena hadn't happened which nowadays kind of opens up, there was the World of India, South Asian to people so their connection with the culture, the reason that they were being encouraged a lot of the time by the parents to come to and learn dance, was it was a way of connecting to their own culture and I mean that was probably a very key motivation, definitely for the parents and as a teacher I ensured, or I tried to ensure that they enjoyed the learning and you know they start enjoying performing, they start enjoy learning the dance and getting to know their culture, getting to know the stories and you know so the parents wouldn't have to persuade them to come, they will want to come because they have so much fun and they enjoy the process of learning something different, which they did, so I had a very good, very active and quite an exciting young bunch of dancers very soon. So I also set up a small performing group called Natyam with them.

22:58 I So these were mostly sort of second generation migrants, or were there any older people who were slightly more kind of homesick?

24:10 R There were some, actually one or two mothers who also joined in, but I would still think they were second generation and even third generation actually at that time. We had some really little ones who were coming as well. Second, third generation definitely yes.

24:32 I Ok so these were people who grew up in Birmingham?

24:36 R Yes.

24:37 I And so what did they make of the areas that they lived? Did they have a sort of strong connection with Birmingham or with Sparkhill?

24:47 R I think at that time the temples were definitely clear centres of culture, and so their connection with India or their own culture or South Asian culture would be either through social events within the community within the family coming to like dance classes like mine, or going to the temple which

also was quite popular and a very regular activity with most families that were coming to my class. So again they connected me to the temple which was on Warwick Road and we've actually developed quite a lot of activity with them and performances later, they had a nice space.

25:45 I Erm. So could you tell me a little bit more about the Natyam and the dance companies with you. Tell me a little bit more about when this started and some of the places that the dance teaching took you and the students and what they sort of went on to do?

26:07 R I'm having to rack my brain, my memory as well. I remember one of the first kind of biggish performance I did and I actually had to give a name because I was with Aston University at that time and there was a theatre there called Triangle Theatre, don't know if it's still there, and there was a festival of Black Arts, I'm talking of 80's, mid 80's and they invited me with my group, so I put together a performance of different dances for them and for the purposes because they wanted certain, I put a name I had to put a name so I created a name Natyam and we performed. That was one of the first performances we did in Birmingham. Later we were invited in other events quite regularly, my students would perform, and we used to be performing at MAC sometimes during the year and I remember there was an international festival. We went to Liverpool, it was a garden festival, something international garden festival or something. I remember we went to represent India, very proud location at that time, with my students so yes we performed not that, because it wasn't very formal and structured at those times. Most of the activity of dance and cultural performances were happening very ad hoc through people you knew who would recommend you or someone on the phone, getting to know from somebody, so it wasn't in a way managed like you know you have a manager who is marketing your work and the formal theatres inviting you to perform. None of that existed, so the performances were very much informal settings within either the community or part of festivals.

28:38 I So not like the well-oiled machine that Sampad is today.

28:40 R Sorry?

28:41 I Not like the well-oiled machine that Sampad is today.

28:43 R No, no not at all that's why Sampad became relevant (laughs) and I started thinking this is not good, we should do something about it.

28:53 I And er some of your students went on to bigger and brighter things?

28:57 R Oh definitely, definitely. I mean the students that I, who were with me at that time, and of course are now all grown up and established. I stopped teaching around early in 90, 1991. I started Sampad and I realised that juggling my own dance career and activities and starting to get an

organisation off the ground wasn't realistic. I tried for a while but it just wasn't working, so my class was then taken over by one of my senior students, an English girl Alison Webb I think she's called Michael now and very very sincere, very good teacher, very good dancer, she was a physics teacher and a Bharatanatyam dancer, very lovely girl. So she took over my classes and she carried on the teaching at Stratford Road at the centre, yes, and so that's when I felt that this ad hocness of our activities needed to be structured and pulled together, so Sampad was conceived in the late 80's/early 90's.

30:34 I Great ok. Let's talk a little bit more then about your memories and recollections of Sparkhill and the surrounding area. Maybe if you could describe your journey to Sparkhill that you'd take I guess on a Saturday morning in the 1980's from Bourneville or wherever you were based at the time.

30:58 R Yes at the time I was travelling from the Bournville estate every morning.

31:08 I So whereabouts did this sort of take you past, describe the route and the sort of landmarks you saw on the way.

31:13 R I would take a bus to Stratford Road and, no. 1, took ages to get me there (laughs). I remember I used to get on the bus and forget about life because it would just go round all the whole city, but that was interesting. Then of course my husband helped me and he used to drop me and pick me, but I also remember you know lovely memories of, because Stratford Road at that time had all these bustling Indian shops, so every Saturday after class we would do all our grocery shopping and then we'd pop into Milan's Sweet Shop every other Saturday and you know we'd buy the samosas and the jalebis or the bhajias, the Indian snacks before getting home or we'd often go down to Bullring, the old Bullring and I remember there was a hot doughnut shop, we loved that, so very often after class we'd pop into the hot doughnut shop, nice treats. But Stratford Road, the shops, some of them have now changed hands or even closed down, there was the Milan's Sari Shop, the Gohil Emporium which is still there was then in the early days of Gohil Emporium, their daughter used to be in my class, so very often after class when I went there she would be in there. She'd finished my class and she was in the shop with her parents, same with the Milan, Milan Sweet Shop so some of their daughters and daughters-in-law even later, they would be in my class in the morning and later on when I went to the sweetshop they would be in the shop, so there was all these relationships, so everyone kind of knew everybody.

33:17 R There were not that many shops as there are now, but it gave you a fair selection of Saturday shopping if you wanted to do some Indian shopping and yes and I think over the years, because I was quite familiar with that street, of the Stratford Road, I could see the change as the community started, the

profile of the community started shifting, and you know there as a kind of the social and the economic movement that starts from the city end up the road towards Hall Green, Solihull. You could actually visibly see the change you know in the profile of people in the change in the shops, in the ownership of the shops, the names, the cultures. So that for me was a very interesting feature that how that road actually started changing it's character.

34:35 I What were the biggest changes? What were the ones that sort of really stuck with you as sort of being quite sort of defining changes or was it more a gradual..?

34:44 R It was very gradual, it was very gradual. I think it wasn't very obvious either, but it was changing, you could see that, and I think talking to people you would see the ambition was to move up and there was an economic migration that people were aiming to have a house in Hall Green and then they were finally aiming to have a house in Solihull. So that was very much a mind set for some people. A very hard working community and a lot of them realised that ambition as well.

35:30 I I was going to say did you see sort of particular examples of some of your like friends and their families kind of make their way up to more affluent areas from where they started?

35:43 R Yes I can't remember the names. I mean a lot of the students who came to me, their parents, they did move, Gohil who's there, they moved up the road. One of my students Sneha Mistri who is now a big name in Spain, she runs her own dance classes, as a huge Bollywood dance star in Madrid and Spain and now you know tours across the whole world, and she started from Stratford Road, she used to come to my classes, she was all of ten, nine/ten years old and a few years back I went to Madrid and it was amazing that she was a huge name, she was producing a big show in a theatre like a West End Theatre style, you know sold out, and fluent Spanish, a full Spanish audience, a full Spanish team of dancers. So you know you can see the journey that's bigger and in a little way in a dance class in Stratford Road, her journey has been quite a transformational one and striking and exciting.

37:10 I And so what was her next step after your class?

37:15 R Erm London

37:16 I London

37:17 R Yes

37:17 I Ok

37:18 R The love of young people. She did a degree in dance from Middlesex, she was

performing, she was an amazing dancer, she was a very very beautiful dancer, could adapt to a number of styles, she was very flexible, she was very outgoing and confident. So she became well known in the dance scene over here. She also dabbled a bit on becoming a singer, a pop singer, a little bit, and then one day discovered Spain and moved to Spain and that's where she is, she has been for the last ten years or so.

38:06 I Do her family still have strong links around the area?

38:10 R Yes, yes we invited her back in 2012 during the Bollywood festival, she came with her performers performing group, performed for us, and of course her whole family was there. I still meet her parents from time to time, they've now moved to Leicester, so yes.

38:33 I So in terms of the Stratford Road and Sparkhill, Sparkbrook area, where else did you and your students frequent?

38:42 R Where else did I?

38:44 I Where else did you and your students, where else did you sort of go to shop and eat and socialise?

38:51 R Oh. Soho Road was the other, it still is, Stratford Road and Soho Road are essentially South Asian centres. Though mind you, there's also Small Heath and it's expanded a lot more. At that time yes, Soho Road has a more Punjabi feel to it. Stratford Road has stronger Gujarati feel to it. When I was there, later on more Pakistani communities moved in and the profile shifted and then the Somalis and isn't it there's been a migration, new communities who are coming to the city, a lot of the time they start from the city end of Stratford Road, so we see the change starting from there, yea.

39:46 I In terms of, because you mentioned a few places that you used to go to on the Stratford Road, but was there anywhere else that you use to end up on the Stratford Road, I mean that you used to shop?

40:00 R The Greggs, the usual Greggs pastry shop, the jewellery shop, Durga Jewellers who became like our, they were a gold shop, so the rare occasion when I did buy some gold, we did it from them, and all of these people, the shops, they were not impersonal shopkeepers, you go and you chat and they ask you about your family. You ask them about their family, so you know, they became closer than just going to a shop and shopping as you would do in a city centre, you don't know anybody. So it wasn't impersonal at all, so all of these they became regular acquaintances and you got to know them and they'd ask, so when are you going to India or they'd advise don't do this, don't buy this, maybe this is doing very well and you trusted them so there was that element of trust. They really appreciated the fact that I was you know teaching dance, that I was introducing cultural elements to the lives of

their families and friends and their children. They really appreciated that, supported my work, they came to performances I organised, they were my mailing list a lot of the time, and that friendship still remains to a degree. I mean as I said some of the shops have closed down and people have moved on, but if I go to Gohil now I still talk to Mrs Gohil because I knew her and her daughter so I will ask her about her daughter and her grandchild, so you just do that.

41:55 I And this was sort of shortly after the kind of the start of, the blossoming of the Balti triangle, the original restaurants that started in the 70's. Did you notice any sort of the change in the area there in the Sparkbrook sort of area?

42:15 R I'm trying to remember.

42:17 I Did it become sort of busier, was there more influx?

42:20 R Yes yes I'm sure you know, it grew busier by the day. It wasn't like there was a fall in in the business, I think it became more sort of commercial and people could see the opportunities, so the whole Balti triangle developed, it wasn't there in the early days, there were not that many shops. I mean Birmingham, if I'm talking of sort of mid 80's, late 80's, it closed down after 6.30/7 o'clock in the evening, not much happened unless it was particular days or you were very clear where you were going. But yes I think the change started happening sort of late 80's, 90's onwards and more and more restaurants happened and more and more stronger Pakistani groups were coming and starting their businesses doing very well and the community grew so that's how that whole area started becoming much more busier, much more bustling and taking a stronger character. There was also of course investment from the government, from the council, the European funds were brought in so that improved the quality of the area with the roads, the parking and so on. So I think that should have helped.

44:13 I So how would you say the area, the areas along the Stratford Road compare now compared to your earlier days in the early 80's when you first started taking the classes?

44:29 R I think the number of shops have increased exponentially and they are now spreading into the side roads as well. Some of the buildings are the same, you know the look of the road, I find it the same to be honest because it hasn't changed so much. I remember going to the Piccadilly Cinema when it opened and then it changed again, the cinema. It was, I think before the multiplexes started showing Bollywood movies, it was the Piccadilly Cinema where we would go, very old and not very well maintained, but it didn't matter, at least you know we could go to a cinema and with friends and all of us and enjoy watching a Bollywood film on big screen, that was great. So we would do that on a regular basis. As I said until multiplexes are now showing

it, so we go there instead, and Piccadilly I think has changed from being a cinema to something else and some shops have changed and I think because the styles have changed and the generations have, of course, you know changed to a degree, shops cater to what people want, so I suppose that's what has happened, whereas in the past we would probably get much more traditional stuff, you know traditional saris and traditional things. You now get designer outlets, you've got a lot of named outlets of designer outfits a much more modern look to the shops. It's a competitive market, even there's a huge shop I saw recently selling wedding cakes and you know, there's many more food outlets, diverse food outlets and I suppose early days in the 80's when there were I think more Gujarati communities there, there were more vegetarian shops and outlets, that has now changed a lot. So you get much more non-veg restaurants. So those are some of the things that I observe and of course as I said towards the city end now we have the Somali, the Yemeni community in the Bordesley Centre, or seeing all of those kind of develop over the years and yea.

47:47 I So what brings you, what takes you to the areas there now? You said you're still friends with the Gohil Emporium, but besides that is it business or leisure that kind of takes you down the Stratford Road now?

48:02 R Yes well on and off we go to have a Balti, to the fresh fabulous restaurants and during the festival time, I'm not a big shopper, but during the festivals, Indian festival time I need some things for the festival, so I know exactly where to go, so I go to Gohil and buy something, I go to Jalaram or on one of the side roads. These are new outlets but they keep very specific culturally, you know catering to those kind of Indian cultures and you know exactly where you will go to get what. So in certain ways there is a specialism in what they offer that I will not get if I go to a city centre shopping mall. So there's a niche market over there.

49:01 I Great. Erm. Let's talk a little bit more about the founding of Sampad and these activities now. Do you sort of miss the days of taking your dance classes actively, because you said you were inspired by Sampad because of the, so you could get away from that kind of ad hoc stuff. Do you kind of miss the old days, pine for the old days at all?

49:32 R Yea I think I do a little bit, but around the mid 80's, soon after I also started working as a dance animateur for the Arts Council initially in Leicestershire and then in the West Midlands and the dance animateur post for the West Midlands was based at MAC and it was funded by Arts council and Birmingham City Council and towards the end of the contract they wanted me to put together a report of what would be a good resource for the city in terms of South Asian dance and when I did the sort of feasibility of setting up something in the region in the city, I realised that dance was only one part of cultural you know deed for the city of what we could cater. There was a wealth of talent, wealth of arts and artists residing in the city in the region

and we could offer a lot more in a much more meaningful way to, not just our own community, but to the wider communities in a very diverse city like Birmingham.

50:59 R So that's when I put together the concept of Sampad, which is a multi-arts based organisation providing activities from training to performances to exhibitions, to a whole range of things, through which a) we could create jobs, we could engage professional artists. We could train amateurs to become professionals and make a connection with the a) the mainstream arts and cultural field, activities, but also being able to offer entertainment or training in a meaningful way to other communities, whether it's in schools or colleges or communities or theatres. I think to develop an awareness of what was available, the quality of it was important to raise the profile of all these artists, to raise the profile of the cultural wealth that we have, hence the name Sampad which means wealth, a treasure. So Sampad started, we established, with a small group of friends and artists in 1990 with some initial support funding from the Cadbury's Trust, and then of course Arts Council and City Council have continued to support us. But I remember in those days, Nahid Siddiqui was a very important, a big name in kathak dance, Chitrleka Bolar was teaching Bharatanatyam and performing Bharatanatyam, I was doing Bharatanatyam and Indian creative style and Gurcharan Mall was a big name in bhangra dancing and drumming, and essentially it was just the four of us who was really bringing the professional dance scene and, you know, creating the buzz and quality in the city. But other than ourselves there were music artists, there were crafts artists, there were writers, there were film makers and theatre and drama artists, so once we created this infrastructure of Sampad, people came. The artists came, the students came, the audience came and it became a much much more exciting and I would say a much more, a stronger way of connecting with people, getting them to appreciate and enjoy what the whole South Asian culture could offer them, and a dialog to begin that dialog where it wasn't seen as a peripheral cultural activity or something that could be just a token something exotic taking place in a school once a year during Diwali or connecting everything with Indian food. You know, there were certain attitudes and certain preconceptions that we all addressed and challenged in an artistic way.

54:46 I And er, what served as your inspiration for the My Route Project? How did it erm...how did it take off?

54:56 R It was really travelling down this road on those early days and later on, and seeing the visible change down the road. Seeing the visible change of people, the communities were shifting, the shops as I was saying earlier, the shops, the businesses, the language, the look of people and how they dress, so basically it was a real visible change that would happen once in every two/three years, so you could kind of see how people were moving on down the road, so initially I thought this is a very interesting phenomena, maybe it's

not just, yeah, it was happening down Stratford Road but it's not just that road, that this phenomena is happening, it's probably happening in every city where there's diversity, where there's migration that, you know, people start from somewhere and aspire to go up the social ladder, the economic ladder and there's a starting point and it was just a nice model that could capture that sort of bit of story, bit of history. Initially my thinking was to just connect it to a bus route, so we would follow a bus route down the road and see how that, you know what you experience as you travel in a bus, what you see and how that shift happens. But after the initial research which was done, we realised that there was so much more to that whole area. There were so many stories, there was so much history lying there, so much information that needed to be understood and told and captured, because if we didn't do it, it would probably just disappear. So that's how this particular My Route project then became and it's in a much more comprehensive way looking at the past and you know walking through that story to present times.

57:25 I Do you feel that the stories from along the Stratford Road, do you feel they're sort of not told enough? Do you feel that not enough is done you know to draw attention to the area, to raise the profile of the area at all?

57:43 R Even my experience of Stratford road is only from mid-80's, and I don't really live there, I used to travel in and out so what I saw inspired me to do a project like this, just reacting to the changes and responding to some of the stories that I saw was happening. But what became evident with the research was there were many people who have been there for generations and they had a lot more to offer in terms of their story and in a way it encapsulates the story of probably many roads in this city, it's kind of capturing a time of migration and in a city like Birmingham which is very welcoming to new migrants, which is why people come here and what they bring to the city and what they get from the city, because with every cultural group that comes, with every different groups, whichever part of the world they're coming from, whether it's the South Asian continents, whether it's African continent or it's the Caribbean part of the world, you know whichever part of the world they're coming from, they are carrying with them another story and that I think enriches this city.

59:25 R Of course it has its associated challenges and there are many socio-economic problems that is part of society now, part of our you know lives, but at the same time I think we are very fortunate that a city like this, Birmingham, is there which is exciting and it's different and it's got that capacity to embrace diversity in a very positive way so you know it's quite possible as you're walking down Stratford Road now that you will probably hear possibly anywhere between nine to ten languages. You'll come across as many or more food, the recipes and cooking styles and offers and fashion style and religious and cultural beliefs and lifestyles which I think is much more exciting

than where everybody looked, behaved, spoke, ate the same thing. It's not boring, Stratford Road is not boring and Birmingham is not boring.

01:00:54 I Do you, on a personal level do you kind of miss being there every Saturday in Sparkhill and that area because of it being such a vibrant and diverse area?

01:01:07 R Not right now you know, and way down the road, that's when I'm talking about twenty five/thirty years ago, so nowadays Saturday morning's a lie in time if I can, if we don't have a weekend event. No I don't, I will tell you what makes me proud is when I see the seeds we planted at those early times, that is now continuing in a much more you know, it's enriched way that they're offering a lot more than we thought they would. So just taking my students or students of my peers, you know Nahid Siddiqui, Chitrleka, Gurcharan, what we did and some of my senior colleagues around the country, what we did twenty five/thirty years ago, and the kind of spark that we could ignite is now many lamps across the whole country and it's lighting many lives, which is really rewarding to see that we have been able to give something that's enriching not just our lives and their lives but it cascades down to their children and their students and further down the line in the community in society in the families. I think it provides answers to the complexities of identity issues about confidence, about knowing where I'm from, why I'm here? Where I want to go? How do I fit into this picture? It's some of those answers come from that cultural sort of relationships or connections that you make, encounters, that those cultural encounters provide you with some of those answers about who am I?

01:03:28 I I was going to ask you what you're most proud about in your career, but I think you've just answered it so Piali thank you very much.

01:03:34 R Thank you.