

This is Your Heritage –

South Gloucestershire Stories of the Indian Community

Interview: Maria Coelho Full Interview Audio Transcription (15-11-2021)

Transcription by Bristol Transcription & Translation Services and edited by a member of the South Gloucestershire Museums Group, 9th February 2022.

Interviewer: Halima Malek

Recorder: Hardik Gaurav

Recorder: Hardik Gaurav

Location: At home in Winterbourne

Participant prefix key:

I: Interviewer

R: Respondent

Transcript begins 00:06

I: Hello. Today is 15th November 2021. My name is Halima Malek. I'm here from the Indian Heritage Project. Hello, Maria.

R: Hi.

I: Could you please introduce yourself to us?

R: Yes. My name is Maria Coelho.

I: How do you spell your name?

R: C, O, E, L, H, O.

I: Thank you. Where were you born, Maria?

R: I was born in Neasden in London, in the Borough of Brent

I: Thank you. So, if this is correct, you come from an Indian heritage background.

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- R:** I do, yes. My father came from Kolar Gold Fields, which is Karnataka in one of the southern states of India. He came over in around about 1954.
- I:** And your mum?
- R:** My mum was a person from Neasden in London. She's white British. Her name is Edna. My dad's name is Trevor.
- I:** Okay, thank you. Can I just ask what your father's religious background was?
- R:** That's quite interesting, actually. He was part of the Anglo-Indian community, so he was Catholic, which a lot of people over here, it's not what they're expecting. A lot of people say to me, 'So, you've got an Indian heritage. What religion are you?' They always go for that one, because it's something they can identify with, and they're not expecting me to say that he was a Catholic.
- I:** So, obviously, there are quite a lot of Catholics, and there is a very big Catholic community back home in India. But like you said, it's not something that is well-known here in England.
- R:** No.
- I:** Okay. How old was your father when he moved out to England? And why did he move to England?
- R:** I think he was around about 25. He came over because his aunty Emily was already here. So, that's my grandma was called Ivy. She was part of a really large family. My great-grandad, Paul, owned a general store out in Kolar Gold Fields, and so quite a lot of the family had emigrated over here. Emily was already living in London. So, he emigrated over, and initially lived with his aunt Emily, and then got himself rooms after that.
- I:** Okay. So, what was his vocation?
- R:** That's an interesting one. I don't think my dad really ever had a vocation in life. I think he came over in that first wave of mass migration to this country. It was post-war. This country was asking for people to come. Just like people came over on the Windrush, my dad got himself over on the P&O Strathnaver. It took him about two weeks to get over here. I don't know whether he had a plan. I think he just knew that he'd find out what the opportunities were when he got here. He had had a bit of a chequered academic career, because of his circumstances back in India. His father died when he was nine years old. His brother, Leslie, his eldest brother had died of typhus, and his father died soon after that. I think they died in the same year. Then, he had a younger brother called Tony who was significantly younger than him, and he felt that he needed to leave school and support his brother. I think that might have been some of the decision of coming over here, because he felt he could then send money back to support his mum and his brother back in India.

- I:** Okay. Did your father have any knowledge of the English language when he had moved out to England?
- R:** Yes. My dad spoke English as a first language. In fact, he spoke a smattering – [what we'd 0:04:34] call it – a small amount of Tamil in order to communicate with other people. But, yes. English was his first language.
- I:** Okay. So, English was his first language, and Tamil was his second language, would you say?
- R:** I would say Tamil was an additional language. I wouldn't call it a second language. I don't think he was fluent enough in Tamil to have called it a second language.
- I:** Okay, thank you. So, your father has now moved to England, like you said, for a better life, not so much as a career move. Where did he move to?
- R:** He docked at Tilbury. I think his aunt Emily would have been living around... I don't know, actually. I know she ended up in Hayes, in London. But I'm not entirely sure. She might have been living in the Dollis Hill area. I'm not sure. I know that he moved to that area of London, to Brent. But again, it's something that's a bit sketchy, because my father passed away when I was 18. So, all of the things that I would have wanted to have asked him, I wasn't able to, and it wasn't something that my mum was that acquainted with, so she couldn't answer those questions either.
- I:** That's okay. Thank you. Did your dad share any of his memories of his travelling from India to England?

R: Not when I was a child. It was something that I found later on. I actually was going through my mum's possessions, and I found some postcards that he'd actually bought on the ship. He'd written on the back of the postcards, 'This is where we held Mass,' because obviously, his religion was quite important to him. 'This is where we had dances in the evening. This is where we ate our lunch.' So, it's clearly scribed on the back of the postcards. Those were really significant to me, because up until that time, I knew he'd come over on a ship, but I didn't know which one. I've subsequently been able to look that up on the internet, because obviously, it's a fascinating part of my history, how he actually managed to travel here. Also, it's something that I mention in my work on diversity with children, when I'm teaching children through my puppet show, I mention his suitcase that he brought over, and I mention the length of the journey. I always question the children and say, 'Why would he choose to get on a ship that took so long to get here?' which makes them curious, and makes them think about that question of that transition. 'Why would he take two weeks to get here? Was he going on holiday?' They always come up with the conclusion, 'No, he wasn't. He was coming here to live.' It gets them to investigate how much he gave up in order to move here. I think my dad was really brave – really brave – to give up everything he knew in India to get on that ship for such a long time, and arrive in a country which was not entirely welcoming back in the '50s. It was quite a hostile environment to come into as someone who was quite different. So, I'm really, really proud of that. I'm really proud of that leap of faith that he took.

I: Thank you. Had he mentioned any of his struggles to you?

R: My parents played things really close to their chest. I used to talk to my mum about what it was like having children that looked different, and a husband that looked different back in the '50s and the '60s, and through the '70s, which as we well know, was not the most tolerant society at the time. My mum said, 'I never noticed anything.' But I think my mum was a bit thick skinned. I know my dad had an awful lot of rejection in terms of the work opportunities that were presented to him. My dad went to school in Mysore, so he was sent away to school. So, he did have educational opportunities. He was educated to probably... I don't know what standard you would call it. He wasn't a graduate, but he was educated to a reasonable standard. So, he was coming over here with quite middle-class aspirations, but they were never achieved. I think my family at home thought the streets of London were paved with gold, and my dad never found that [scene 0:09:49]. So, my father's opportunities over here were very limited. He always worked in unskilled labouring jobs. More factory-based work, and he didn't ever evolve through that glass ceiling to be able to do anything else, which I know that he would have been more than capable of doing. The interesting thing I find is I was reading a novel by Bernadine Evaristo recently, and it mentioned the idea of migration, that if the person that first arrives here doesn't have opportunities, they hope that their children will. My brother and I are both graduates. We've had a really comfortable life. Unfortunately, my father died before he was able to see that happen. That has always been a great tragedy of my life, that my dad was never able to realise that maybe he didn't have the opportunities presented to him, but because of what he gave us, and the struggles that he and my mother had, he laid the foundations for my brother and I to be really successful in life. I think that's what people who emigrate, that's what migrants do. They make the most of the opportunities that are presented to them. It's usually their children that benefit from that, not them. My mum and dad lived in a very meagre house. They always struggled to afford things. They worked really hard, both of them worked really hard. My mum worked child minding, my dad worked in a factory, but we always went on holiday once a year. They managed to buy a car, which was like buying a rocket in the '70s. But they put money away, they struggled, they didn't have things. They went without, often they went without to provide for us. We didn't often have new things, but we always had, because of them, and I'm very grateful to them.

I: Yes. It's almost like that first generation of migrants sacrificed their own ambitions and careers to make a better life for themselves, but also, for the family members back home in India. Thank you. Okay. So, your father is now in England, he knows people already, and he has the language. So, how did he meet your mum?

R: This is actually quite romantic. My dad's cousin Ken was – 'walking out' they would have said in those days – was walking out with a lady called Margaret. Margaret worked in the florist where my mum worked. So, an introduction had been made for my dad to see someone else. This is something I only found out recently when I was talking to my mum in the last few years, because I'd known about the date that my mum and dad had gone on. I'd known that she hadn't known him; it was a blind date. But I hadn't known that the reason she was chosen for the blind date is because another woman was going to go on a date with my dad, but she rejected him because she found out about his heritage and said, 'Oh, no. I don't want to go out with one of them.' So, my mum said, 'I'll go out with him.' I turned around to her when I was speaking to her and I said, 'And you said, I'll go out with him, because I'm not racist.' She said, 'No. I said I'll go out with him because I'm not fussy.' I thought, 'Oh, right. I'm the product of I'm not fussy.' But do you know what? I'm really glad they met, because clearly, they saw something in each other from that first meeting. Because they met on the blind date, they obviously felt that they had a lot in common. They started to see each other. I think they were married within 18 months of that meeting. So, yes. It was a romantic collision, you know. Again, I think they were married in 1959 in a time when, if you look at their wedding photographs, one half comes from an Asian background, and the other half comes very much from a white British background. But this is 1959. That photograph of their wedding is quite extraordinary for that time. Again, I feel really proud and really privileged that it was my parents making that decision. My mum or my dad didn't really think about it. They were just two people that were in love with each other. I once said to my mum, 'Were you really in love with my dad when you got married to him?' She went, 'He was the only one who ever asked me.' I thought, 'Great. So, I'm now not fussy, and the only one who ever asked. That's great.' But people weren't maybe necessarily romantic in the 1950s, they were probably pragmatic. But if I'm the product of pragmatism, that's okay.

I: Thank you. So, before we get to the wedding of your parents, how did your father's family feel when they found out that he was now in love and in a relationship with a white British lady? And vice versa? How did your mother's family feel? Because like you said, this wasn't the norm in the '60s to be dating a man from a different culture, caste, religion, ethnicity, everything you can think of. So, how did that go?

R: I think amongst the Anglo-Indian community here in Britain, which wasn't that large, I think there was a great acceptance. Because, to be honest – and we didn't stay in touch with a lot of our family – but if I look at other marriages that were happening, there was Brian and Valarie. Valarie was Anglo-Indian and Brian was white British. There were a number of other couples. So, I think there was a great acceptance from my dad's family, because the Anglo-Indian community, for want of a better word, come from quite a European leaning culture, being Catholic. Although there were elements that are very Indian to the culture, there are also elements that are quite European as well. My mum's family were delighted when they met my dad. He was the most charming, most affable, best prospect they could ever think of for my mum. I found out from my grandad and my nan that they absolutely adored him from the time they first met him, and they didn't ever stop adoring him. In fact, when my father died way too early at the age of 55, I was actually quite relieved that my nan had already passed away, because I think it would have really broken her, because she absolutely adored my dad. She took him in as her son, and that was it. It was a very mutually acceptable decision on both sides that they were going to get married.

I: That's very beautiful, but also very rare at that time. Was your mother of Catholic origin as well?

R: She wasn't, actually. My mum, I suppose, was brought up CofE, but very loosely. But my mum always said – and this was something she was very, very particular about – she said that, 'I didn't want your grandma back in India to say that I had turned your dad away from his faith.' So, she made absolutely sure they were married in a Catholic church, which incidentally and completely coincidentally ended up being up at the end of the road where they bought a house about five or six years later after they were married. So, they were married in a Catholic church, and shortly after that, my mum made absolutely sure that my dad always went to Mass every Sunday. We were brought up going to Mass every Sunday. We were sent to catechism classes, which was like learn how to be a Catholic on a Sunday with the nuns, because there were Catholic schools, but my mum – well, my parents – didn't want me to go to a Catholic school. So, we went to catechism and my mum found out from my brother that one of the nuns was struggling with behaviour in the catechism class. So, she bounded in and she said, 'Right. Well, I'm going to go and sit in the corner and make sure.' My mum did the behaviour. My mum was the bouncer for catechism classes. She became very involved with the church. She became the president of the Union of Catholic Mothers, because nobody stepped forward to take it over. Eventually, she converted to Catholicism, and she was really proud of that, because, as I said, she felt like she didn't want my dad's family to think that she wasn't really accepting of his faith. So, she really, as I said, as with any convert, they're usually more committed. Not more committed, no. I [wouldn't 0:20:27] say that. But they're usually very committed to the faith, because it's something that they've chosen to come into.

I: Do you have many other siblings?

R: I've got a brother called Leslie. He's called Leslie because my father's eldest brother died of typhus, so he was named after my uncle Leslie. He is about two years older than me.

I: So, now your parents have come in from completely different backgrounds, how was it for you as children? What did you count yourselves as? And did the community at the time accept you guys? Were you outcasted because of your differences at the time?

R: My brother says to me, 'I don't know why it's so important to you to point out to people that you're mixed race.' The reason it's really important to me is because I had quite a difficult childhood because of my heritage. It wasn't typical in the 1970s to be different, to be mixed race, and I had a lot of abuse thrown at me when I was small. Being six years old and being in the playground being called the P word, or being called... I find it really difficult. I can't even say the word. I'm going to say it really quickly. I was called 'half-caste' a lot when I was little, and it was a term of abuse. I think about that child a lot. We've all got a child in us, and I think about that little girl who was six years old who didn't belong to anyone. I wasn't Asian, I wasn't Black, I wasn't White, so what was I? And because there weren't that many people like me in the playground, I just got abused for it. Then, as I grew up, because my family weren't that connected to my father's family and the Anglo-Indian community here, I think part of that was because he wasn't doing as well as he had anticipated he would do. My aunty Emily, the aunt that he'd come to live with, one of her daughters married really, really well. She married someone who was a bookkeeper, so that he ran betting shops. They were really wealthy. Really, really wealthy. We went to visit them when I was a child. They had a really fancy house. They had a swimming pool, yes, and a billiards room. I didn't even know what billiards was. I don't think I understood at the time, but I think my dad grew to be ashamed that he hadn't done as well, that he wasn't as good as them. My mum bore that as she would often talk about not being as good as other people, but I don't think they knew a way out of that cycle. How was he going to get out of that cycle of poverty if no one would give him an opportunity? I'm sure he knocked on plenty of doors, but as I said, that glass ceiling was never going to crack for him. So, because he didn't have that opportunity, I think he moved away from the community, just from the force of feeling not good enough for not achieving the same as what other people had. So, I grew up in a world, I suppose, where I wasn't being reflected. When I was really small, the only places that you could get spices and pickles and anything you wanted to cook an Asian diet, you had to go quite far in the '70s. You had to go to a specific place, or the specific shop. I remember my parents going to this shop in Wembley, and I remember standing outside. I remember pinching my nose, because I didn't want to be one of them. This is quite painful. I didn't want to be one of them, because being one of them was what made people call me the P word. So, I'm a child of, like, seven or eight, maybe younger, and that shop that smells like that, that's why I get abused. I don't want to go in there. That will cling to me. People will notice even more that I'm that. That memory really upsets me that I didn't want to be different. No child wants to be rejected. No child wants to be different. I'm thankful for the diversity celebration and the representation we have now. It's not just important. I think it's fundamentally important. It's vital that we bring children up to know it's okay to be them. Because I know how painful that was for me. I think I continued to not find that place as I grew up. When I was a child, I suppose, I just tried to fit in. By the time I was 16, I got angry about it, and I thought, 'Actually, I am going to be this person.' So, I started celebrating my Asian heritage more by wearing long shirts and trousers together to, kind of, replicate a Salwar Kameez, so I would wear that a lot. Or I would wear scarfs, or more Asian fabrics to promote and present the fact that I was Asian. That's where I started to stick and started to feel more comfortable.

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That's when I decided, around about the time I was 16. I thought, 'You know what? I'm not going to reject this anymore. This is who I am. This is what I am, and I'm going to celebrate it.' By the time I was in my 20s and met my husband, who very much regards me as a mixed-race person, then I really, really started to evolve into the person I am now, I think.

I: Congratulations, and well done. That's very brave, especially in the '70s. You mentioned Wembley. So, is that where you spent your childhood and your teenage years?

R: Yes. I was really lucky to grow up in borough like Brent. So, Brent is probably one of the most ethnically diverse areas in the country. I was so blessed to have grown up there. So, although there was rejection and unpleasantness in the playground, as I grew up, there were so many children from different backgrounds that I grew up with an understanding of other people's cultures. But I don't think you could teach it. It has to be a lived experience, and I'm really grateful for that. My best friend, the person I attach myself most to in the world outside my marriage, her family are from Gujarat. My best friend, Viju is so important to me. I've shared so much with her family, weddings, and all sorts of things, birthday parties. And all the other people I grew up with, it was, kind of, like an education intolerance that you couldn't learn unless you lived it, as I said.

I: And it's part of you. It's your heritage.

R: Yes. I think growing up in Brent was part of my heritage. I was very lucky that if I was going to grow up anywhere, that it was going to be somewhere that evolved into a more tolerant place. We were all in our own melting pots, but we were all trying to find our way in the '70s and through the '80s. I think that was a really interesting time to live through in this country, because coming out of the sort of race riots that you had in the '70s that were fuelled by the fact that people felt so rejected, and so set upon in this country. Then a much more tolerant society started to emerge through the '80s. It was quite an interesting time to live through. Again, that is why I'm really grateful to my dad for coming here, because he was part of that change.

I: Okay. He definitely was part of the change. So, just going back a little bit, you're in school, you're not being treated right, you're obviously getting a lot of racial abuse. How did the school deal with it? How did your parents?

- R:** Nobody dealt with it. Nobody dealt with it. Because, I think, bullying in the '70s, 'Get on with it.' Stiff upper lip, 'Just get on with it.' I was too scared to tell on the bullies anyway. I didn't really understand when I was younger what was coming at me. It was just the way people treated you. When I went home, my mum and my dad had a very get-on-with-it approach as well. It just is what it is. Also, I wouldn't have wanted to have told my dad in particular that I was being abused in this way, because that would have just been difficult for him. With my mum's very working-class background, and the way she thought about people being more educated than her, or better than her, she wouldn't have marched up the school. She wouldn't have had the language to know how to tackle something like that. That's why I think it's really important that things like that are tackled now. My children came back from school when they were at secondary school, and because it happens. It still happens today. It shouldn't happen, but my daughter reported that she'd heard the P word being told in jokes. I emailed the school immediately. I was absolutely raging about it. I emailed the school and said, like, 'Not on my watch.' I actually went into the school and started to work with them on things that they could be doing in their school to prevent that.
- I:** You mentioned you met your husband. First of all, could you share his ethnicity, if you don't mind? But also, how and where? How did this all happen?

R: My husband is white British, which was a bit of a shock to me, actually, because I have to say that before I met my husband, I, kind of, leaned more towards people who looked like me. I have to say that. So, I really wasn't anticipating falling for someone who was white and blond, and blue eyed. It just wasn't really the direction I was thinking I was going in. We met at university. We were both studying drama and theatre studies. We became friends. Things, kind of, went from there. I thought he was my friend, then someone came around the corner with him at university and they were draped around him, and I thought, 'Get your hands off of him.' Then I realised that I wasn't just his friend, and that I wanted more out of the friendship. So, we got together in 1989, and we were married by 1991, late '89 we got together. No. It was early 1990 we got together. We were married by 1991. I asked him to marry me three months after we met, after we'd started dating, I asked him to marry me three months in. It's interesting with him as well, because although he is white British, his family, his dad is a university lecturer, or was a university lecturer in economics. His mum was a French teacher and then became a counsellor at a university. So, quite different in terms of class, because I would have said that I was working class. So, quite different in terms of class and education and opportunities. But one of the things that he often said to me was, 'My sisters are mixed race.' So, he has two sisters. He comes from a family of five children, a lot of kids. He has got two biological siblings, and two adopted siblings. His parents wanted to adopt some children in the '60s, and actually, at that time, children of mixed race were simply not being adopted. That's why they chose to adopt Tina and Caroline. So, he had an experience of mixed race within his own family. He has always seen me as mixed race, and for that I'm really – I'm not going to say 'grateful', that doesn't sound like the right word – I'm just really pleased that he has always seen me as who I am. But that experience of growing up as a child and having intolerance thrown towards his siblings, towards his parents. His parents were spat at in the street for having black children in their family. So, because he fundamentally understands that, that has been a part of our relationship. When we got married, I'd moved away from that Catholic upbringing. It wasn't something I felt at ease with anymore. Because we didn't practice a faith, we actually decided to get married in a forest, because we're hippies. We loved being in the outdoors. We decided to have our ceremony in a forest, so we got married legally in a registry office the day before, but that wasn't what I wanted. I didn't want an office to get married in. I wanted something meaningful to us. So, we got married in a forest. We wrote our own ceremony. The ceremony had a collection of poems in it, and stories being offered by our friends, but as well as that, one thing that was really important to me was that Viju, my best friend, brought a tray of Barfi up and offered it to us. We took the Barfi off of it and shoved it into each other's mouths. Now, I had seen that at so many Hindu ceremonies, and although I'm not a Hindu, I wanted to celebrate my Asian heritage, so I needed to put something in there that very firmly said, 'This is my heritage.' So, we managed to put as much Barfi into each other's mouths as possible so that we couldn't speak afterwards. That, for me, was a really important addition. My wedding dress looked quite traditional on the face of it. It was a long jacket, a long coat, which opened at the front. I was very, very particular about this. So, it looked like a wedding dress, but I had Salwar on underneath, so that when I moved forwards, you could quite clearly see I was

wearing Salwar. So, I had a western wedding dress with an Indian suggestion to it. Then, in the evening, I took the wedding dress part off, and I had a full Salwar Kameez when I left the event in the evening. That was really important to me. Interestingly enough as well, Steve, although it's not his heritage, wanted to have a full Sherwani. He wanted a full suit, and he wanted it in orange. We went everywhere, we went all over London, ended up in Bethnal Green Market, literally in the early '90s walking around going, 'Do you know a tailor? Do you know a tailor? We need a suit.' Eventually, we found a woman who said, 'Yes. I'd love to do this.' She made him a full orange suit. So, he had a traditional Indian suit, and I had my Salwar on underneath. That, for us, was the way we celebrated who we were, who we are. I've brought my children up knowing what their heritage is. They're very, very proud of their heritage. I've brought my children up wearing Salwar Kameez, they had other suits. We ate traditional food. I've brought them up learning to cook those foods as well, because they may, for all intents and purposes, look like they are white British children. My youngest daughter doesn't. She definitely looks like me. But they know who they are, and they know who their grandfather is. For me, again, that is fundamental to our family that we celebrate that part of our heritage. It's my children's heritage, and that matters to them, it matters to Steve, and it matters to me.

I: Like you said, [so now, you're still in 0:40:42] London. So, what was the journey? How did you then move to the south west of Gloucester?

R: We went travelling when we were younger. So, we both graduated, we both completed PGCEs, Post Graduate Certificates in Education, became teachers. Steve was studying in Birmingham. Then we just suddenly thought, 'Who know what? We're going to end up getting settled somewhere, having kids, doing the whole we're married thing.' We just decided to jump out and go on an adventure. So, we went off travelling. When we came back from travelling, it just became apparent to us that we didn't want to live in London. It just wasn't us. It was just too busy, too expensive mainly. It was really expensive. To buy a house there was three times the price it would be in any other part of the country. We almost, pretty much, stuck a pin in the map. We knew someone who lived here in Hotwells. We'd visited them quite often, so we knew Bristol. Steve applied for two different jobs. I was applying for jobs as well. He was offered a job in Solihull in Birmingham, or here in Bristol. We thought about it, and we thought, 'We'll go to Bristol. It just feels right.' So, we moved to Bristol. We lived in Fishponds initially. The reason, again, that we moved to Fishponds was I was working in adult education at the time. So, I had travelled out to Fishponds, and I'd travelled to Easton, and St. Paul's. I'd travelled to Horfield, St. Werburgh's, Windmill Hill. People had said, 'You guys are quite alternative. You'd fit in in St. Werburgh's, or Windmill Hill.' I went to those places and I thought, 'No. It doesn't feel like me.' Easton and St. Paul's didn't feel like me either, so where did I fit? Again, in my life, where do I fit? Where do I fit in? So, I went to Fishponds, and I was wondering around and I thought, 'This feels like it has got a really nice mix of people for me,' socioeconomically, and in terms of the racial dynamism of it as well. There were lots of different people. Everyone lived in Fishponds, and that's where we stayed for about 15 years. Then, eventually, we just felt like we wanted a quieter pace of life again. It wasn't a pin in the map moment. We very much chose to come to Winterbourne. But I was talking about this earlier on. We were saying that in order to move somewhere, because of the way we feel as a family and what is fundamental to us about acceptance, not just us being accepted as family, not just me being seen as who I am, but because we don't do intolerance at all. It's just not something I'm going to tolerate for my family. We actually came and did a bit of research. We're not pub people, but we'd go and sit in the pub and see who walked in and what they looked like, and what conversations were going on around us. Interestingly, I went to one pub around the corner and there was a mixed-race woman serving behind the bar. I watched the way people interacted with her, and that, for me, that was the sort of research you have to do in order to make sure that where you go is somewhere you're going to feel comfortable. Yes. I don't know. That's not really a nutshell of why we came to South Gloucestershire, but it is. You have to do your research before you go somewhere, and I found this to be a really lovely place to live. We've got really nice neighbours here. It's a small community. Everybody knows each other. So, yes, that's why we moved here. It's interesting that, for some people, that has to be a conscious decision. You have to do research, because where you live, you're going to experience it every day. So, you need to know you're going to feel comfortable. There's almost, like, a sadness that you have to do that much work in order to make sure that you're accepted.

I: Yes. Because if you look back to your father's migration, and his acceptance, and your journey as a child and a teenager, you didn't then want your kids to have to face that same situation. Even though they still are, to an extent, hearing certain words that have been spat out there. But as a family, you made a conscious decision that you want to feel as comfortable as you possibly can in a nice town, and understanding to know how you did that. Thank you. So, you're here now, Winterbourne. What's your job role?

R: Steve and I were teachers. He was teaching in special ed schools. He was teaching profoundly disabled children. I was a primary school teacher. At the same time, for the last 20 years, we've run a theatre company. It's very small scale. It's just the two of us. It's called 'Same Same But Different Theatre Company'. It's really, really important to us that we run that theatre company. There's a lot of different parts to it. It's not all about diversity. But fundamental to what we do – I keep saying that word – but the reason we called ourselves Same Same But Different Theatre is because we want to educate about diversity. Bertolt Brecht said theatre should be instructive, and in so far as it is good theatre, then it will entertain. That's what I live my life by. What is the point in just entertaining someone unless there's some sort of element of good to it? Or thought? Or provocation for your audience? There is no point in sitting there just being entertained. There has to be a dialogue with your audience. So, for us, for me, the most important show we do is the Rajasthani puppet show, The Epic Indian Theatre. The nub of it is the story of Rama and Sita told by Rajasthani puppets, but that's not really what it's about at all. As teachers, it just emerged for us. There was a need for it, because when my daughter was at nursery in Fishponds, no one was doing anything to celebrate Diwali. I walked into the head teacher's office and said, 'Why is this not happening?' She said, 'We've got no one to do it.' So, I said, 'I'll come in and do it, then. I'll bring some puppets, and I'll tell the story of Diwali.' So, I started to do that, and then it just evolved. My mum offered me my dad's suitcase that he migrated from India with. She just so happened to offer me that suitcase at the time when I started doing the puppet show. She also offered me a sari, because although she was white British, she had quite a few saris, she had been taught how to put them on, and she would go to events in a sari. She had this one sari that was blue which I use as the sea in the story. So, there are lots of different things we gathered together to do this. When I was telling it one day at my daughter's now primary school, one of the teachers walked past and said, 'You should do this professionally. It's really good.' I was thinking, 'No. It's just something I do for my children.' Then a friend was visiting from New Zealand, and she set me up to do a festival with a friend of hers, quite a big festival, and that's where it launched from. Everyone who saw this show at the festival said, 'This is really important. That's the best thing I've ever seen, and [yaddah-yaddah 0:49:38].' I started to think, 'Well, maybe I should listen to these people.' So, we rudimentarily put some material together, started talking to schools about it. In 20 years, we haven't stopped. But as I said, for me, essentially, that show, An Epic Indian Theatre is not just about the story of Rama and Sita. It delivers that story, but it's about my dad's migration from India. It's about being different, it's about people judging you by the way that you look, not by the skills that you have and the qualities that you bring to society. It's about safeguarding. There's a part in there where children have to question what Sita should do next, whether she should step out of the circle, or whether she should do what she has been asked to do and stay safe. So, there are loads and loads of layers in there that are really important for children to understand. There's lots of questioning about, 'What was in my dad's suitcase? Was he coming on a holiday?' 'No. He was migrating.' 'Why would he do that? What did he leave behind?' all of those questions are in there. It gives me great joy to take that out and to talk to children about that, because it means that in a small way, I'm part of that experience of the

change that I want in children, that they see, even if... I went to a rural school last week, two rural schools in Somerset, and there were so few brown children there. You could see them. It was like, 'Oh.' If you don't take that experience out to communities where they're not very diverse, then how are children going to experience them? So, it's so important to have those conversations. We do other things as a company, but that's the most important thing for me that we do.

I: Thank you. Because if it wasn't for you, these events and this information and education wouldn't be passed around through schools. Have you visited India?

R: Yes. I've been back four times. I say 'back', because my dad, when I was growing up, India was 'back home'. That was how it was described 'back home'. So, when I say I've been back, I've been home four times. I went when I was 10. My mum and dad must have spent forever getting the airfare together. At the time, my mum said, 'I can't come, because somebody's got to look after the dog.' I now don't believe that. I think they just couldn't afford a fourth airfare. So, we flew home in 1977 to see my grandma and my uncle. I think at that time, my dad was probably aware that my grandma was living on borrowed time, and that he wanted to see her again. We stayed there for six weeks, and it was mind-blowing. Because here I was as a 10-year-old who'd tried quite hard to reject this side of my being, and here I was being thrown in at the deep end, getting off a plane. It's very hot, it's very different. We're in the clamour of India in the taxi, and then we're in KGF. I'm eating sugar cane, and we're going around in autorickshaws, and it's mad. Again, that brought me back to myself. That really, really helped me to see inside myself, I suppose. Here was my family in India, and I adored them, absolutely adored them. My aunty Jenny who was married to my uncle Tony, yes. Just really experiencing that side of myself, being dressed up in the clothes and going to the market. Wow. Going to the market. I had some chickpeas yesterday, like a dried chickpea snack, and my first thought was, 'This are like [FAFPs 0:54:45].' We called them 'FAFPs' because I don't want to explain what that was. It the moment my dad called them Fast Action Farting Pills, that's why we called them FAFPs. But you could get like a cone in the market, and they would put these chickpeas in for you. Then you'd walk around eating them. There was another guy who made ice-cream. There were all the stalls, and the goats. It was just amazing, as a child, to be experiencing India in that way, and running around on autorickshaws, to suddenly realise that was a big part of who you are. So, I had my 11th birthday in India, and then we came home. Then I didn't go back until after my father passed away. Now, my father passed away really suddenly in a car crash when I was 18, so life ripped apart. That part of myself that I wanted to really engage with and learn about, suddenly gone. So, about 18 months after he died, maybe sooner, I just decided, 'Right. I'm going to go back home, because if I go home, I might find out more about dad.' So, I worked in retail jobs to get the money together, got myself on a plane, and arrived in India. Yes. So, spent another six weeks in India just really immersing myself back into that. Then couldn't explain to Steve what it was to be Anglo-Indian without a palette to show him what it is to be Anglo-Indian. So, when we were married in 1991, we went back to India as our honeymoon, and spent probably another four or five weeks there. There's a pattern to this. Then later, we went back for a fourth time, but that time, we travelled around northern India, and it's so different. It's completely different to south India. No offence, but I prefer south India. Because north India to me felt like there were a lot tourists there, and because he's white, and I wasn't, like... Even though I always wear Asian clothes when I'm in India, I just feel more comfortable in them. But both in terms of the heat, it's easier, but for me, in terms of modesty and everything else, it's just easier and it's better. But, no. It just didn't feel like we fitted in up in north India. We were treated like tourists, and I didn't like that. I didn't like being treated like a tourist in my own country. Do you know what I mean? Yes. I didn't like north India that much.

I: So, you visited four times. If we go back to your first visit, because of your mixed race and your colouring, how did that stand out in your father's village? Because, surely, they must have raised some eyebrows a little?

R: When I was little, I don't know if I noticed it. When I took my husband back, it was a small village in India, and my husband swears blind that a child was standing in Robeson Pit, which is the local town where all the shops are, stood like this... And was looking at him. My aunty turned around and went, 'He thinks you're a ghost, because you're so white.' There weren't very many people who would go, because it was so remote where we lived. There weren't very many people who visited who weren't Indian. I don't know. I think I was, kind of, channelling my mother when I was in India. I was just like, 'Let them deal with it. I am who I am. I'm not noticing.' So, I don't think I ever really... Because also, a lot of the people that we came into contact with know my family, it's a really small community over there, and everybody you meet, they're people that know your family. Maybe in Robeson Pit, people probably stared a bit, but it's not something I really noticed.

I: I guess that made you feel more comfortable and, like you said, more accepted. So, we're here now. You're still in Winterbourne. You have how many children?

R: Two.

I: You have two children. You've emerged through your journey, and you're teaching, and you're educating people. You've got this theatre company, and you're celebrating your background and your ethnicity, and your children's. So, what now? What does the future hold for Maria?

R: I don't know. I don't know. Maybe I need to be more at ease with myself, because I still feel – and I think I'm always going to feel – like I'm sitting on a fence. That I don't want to be perceived as white, but I don't feel that I'm perceived as Asian. Maybe that's a bit of internal work that I need to do to get past that, to get past those feelings of rejection. I would like to continue with the theatre company, doing more and more within schools. We're not Jewish, but we do a performance about Judaism that gets children interacting around the story of Moses. Again, that's about diversity for me. It's just about bringing that message into schools, or in other forums, you know, even at a festival, educating people about those things. I think there's a great appetite in this country for voices to be heard. I feel really in a privileged position to be one of those voices. So, I think that's what the future holds for us as a family. I'd like to think that as my children grow up that we continue to celebrate my heritage through them and their children, and that my father's journey is never forgotten. That when my children have children, their great-grandfather's journey is still celebrated, because I don't think that... I was talking to someone about this the other day and she said, 'I've only got an eighth Indian in my family. It's in my heritage. It's so watered down.' I said, 'I don't believe that that is a thing. I don't think it matters how far you move away from your heritage. It's fundamental that it's a part of you.' I always want that to be a part of my family, because I think my father was so brave in what he did. I really do believe it helped pave the way towards society changing. I think, for all its faults, that the UK is a wonderful country to live in. It's a tolerant country, and that tolerance is created through action. Diversity doesn't come out of a vacuum, and tolerance doesn't come out of that vacuum either. Unless we are prepared to continually work for it, then other children are going to have the experience that I had, and I'm not prepared to let that happen.

I: I feel like your whole life seems that you just want to celebrate your father, your father's life. If your father were here today, what kind of conversation do you think you would have, as the person you are now, with him? A single, quick conversation about what you have achieved, but through him?

R: That's a tough one, really, because my dad hasn't been in my life for about 40 years, but he always has been in my life, and I do have conversations with him all the time. I just would like to say to him about how proud I am of him, and about how much I know that he gave up in order to make a good life for us. I'd just like to say how grateful I am for the journey that I've gone on, because of the risks he took, and that I'm proud of him for making the world what it is. If people stay where they are, then nothing changes. I'm grateful to all the people that move around the world and make opportunities, and make different decisions, but I'm most grateful to my father. I wish that he had been around long enough to see the fruit from the seeds that he planted. There are seeds within the story that I tell in The Epic Indian Theatre, there are seeds that Sita plants. I don't know if they were in the original. I really don't. But I've often wondered why she plants a garden. I think it's all part of that journey. It's what you lay down when you get somewhere. That's what I'm really grateful to him for is for what he laid down, for what he planted. It's a shame he never lived to see it flourish.

I: But his life, and his journey, and your mother's is being celebrated through you.
That's a big thing.

Transcript ends 66:14

