

This is Your Heritage...

Stories from the Indian Community in South Gloucestershire

Interview: Alka Mehta Graham Full Interview Audio Transcription (19.11.2021)

Transcribed by Bristol Transcription & Translation Services and edited by a member of the South Gloucestershire Museums Group, June 2022.

Interviewer: Halima Malek

Recorder: Hardik Gaurav

Location: At home in Bristol.

Participant prefix key:

I: Interviewer

R: Respondent

Transcript begins 0:00

I: My name is Halima Malek and I'm here from the Indian Heritage Project. Sat across from me is Alka Mehta-Graham. Could you please introduce yourself to us?

R: Yes, Alka Mehta-Graham.

I: Thank you. Could you please spell your name?

R: It's A.L.K.A and then M.E.H.T.A - G.R.A.H.A.M.

I: Alka, could you just share with us a little bit of your job role?

R: I'm a Relationship & HR Recruitment expert. What I do is advise & support various sectors such as engineering, IT organisations to get more representation with diversity and inclusion. Basically, I work with firms such as BA Systems, Rolls Royce and other firms, where they may have lack of women for example, and I put recruitment packages together for them to then attract the right candidates who are from a diverse and inclusive background.

I: Okay, thank you. Alka, could you please tell us where and when you were born?

R: I was born in 1970 and I was born in Upton Park in East London.

I: Okay. Were your parents also originally from England?

R: No. My parents came over from the Commonwealth and in particular Kenya.

I: Okay. Could you please tell us a little bit about how they migrated?

R: Both my parents are of the era of colonisation by Britain and they were both born in Kenya, during a time when president Idi Amin wanted to do some ethnic cleansing and wanted to get rid of as many Asians as possible from East Africa which made it absolutely tenable for my parents to be there and as a result they had to make the difficult decision on whether to become British citizens and live in Britain or stay in Kenya. Reluctantly, they chose to come to Britain.

I: Okay, so your parents were born in Kenya but were they of Indian decent?

R: Yes. My parents were of Indian descent from India.

I: Which part of India?

R: Gujarat. Both parents were born in Kenya though and both their parents, my grandparents were born in India a little while ago.

I: Okay, so Indian descent majority of your parents and grandparents were?

R: Yes

I: Then they chose to take up British citizenship. What year did your parents then move to England?

R: They arrived in the United Kingdom in East end of London in December 1969 and that was when they first ever saw winter and experienced snow, they'd never seen snow in their life!

I: Do you know what your parents felt at that time when they moved?

R: My mum was heavily pregnant with me, and she felt cold, and it was very dreary but also quite excited of what the future will hold for them.

I: Okay, so did your parents come here on an economic basis, was there a job here for your father?

R: My father worked for a company in Kenya which had a site in central London, Aldgate East so he got transferred, so he had a job when he arrived, yes.

I: Okay. What was lifelike for them moving out here as a young couple?

R: From my understanding, they lived in a household with lots of different families. There was at one stage around 35 people in one home and they were all from different backgrounds, heritage, religions, but all Asian. They cooked together, they sang together, they danced together, and they looked after each other's children, and more importantly they all helped each other to prosper.

I: You mentioned that your mother was pregnant with you. Did you also have any other siblings at that time?

R: At that time, I was the oldest. I'm the first born in the UK.

- I:** Okay, so what was the culture and the community like outside this house that you were all sharing? Did the community at the time make your parents feel welcome?
- R:** They were very much the first, so they were paving the way for other people but there was a lot of cohesion between black people that had already paved the way for the Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, and it was like one ethnic minority. There was no word called BAME, it was one ethnic minority together and everybody looked after each other, it was very positive in that community. Unfortunately, it wasn't as positive with the British white community to see this cohesion. They've had lots of examples of ups and downs.
- I:** Did your parents have any English language at the time when they had moved in?
- R:** Yeah. Because they came from the Commonwealth, even in the schools it was English in Kenya, so English was part of both their language but there was a lot of people they lived with who didn't speak English as much, so my mum used to teach them and all that kind of stuff just to make sure they integrated into the society.
- I:** I feel like for your parents even though it was difficult they still had a sense of belonging with the people that they knew and the community they were surrounded by.
- R:** Yeah.
- I:** Okay. Alka, you were born and bred in East London like you said, so what was life for you now as a young child in school coming from an Indian background?
- R:** For me, it was quite a double life I would say. You had one life which was a very Asian life at home with your Asian background and your culture, your religions, and the community. Then at school there was another Alka which was very much trying to integrate with the British way of life. For example, I was vegetarian and so eating at home there was no catering for vegetarianism so there wasn't a way... you had to take your packed lunch, so if your packed lunch consisted of Asian food, you could be knocked back for that in school. Curry kid, that kind of thing, so you made sure that you made sandwiches rather than that, so you sort of lived a very double life. It was like a mask that you wore outside and a different mask that you wore inside, do you see what I mean, so yeah, it was quite a difficult upbringing I would say.
- I:** Okay. Were there many other Indian or black children at the school that you attended at that time?
- R:** Yeah, multiculturalism was huge in East London, and yes there was however, we were trying to be something that we weren't when we were outside in the school and with our teachers to get some acceptance. I think that was the main reason for the way that we were but yeah, absolutely. An example would be there was a lot of... over the years as I was growing up, in the beginning it was "we are one ethnic minority", all that kind of stuff and then suddenly it changed, and it became why are you walking down the road with a black boy? Why are you walking down the road with a Muslim? As I saw the phases of what was going on, I found it very sad. I found it quite sad because we all came together. We all were one and now we were segregating ourselves and I wondered why?
- I:** Who was segregating, who was behind this segregation?
- R:** The instigation was first and foremost I would say would be the British, the white British because they would turn around and would speak to me differently than they would speak

to my Nigerian friend who was very black, or somebody that was wearing a Hijab, so it was a completely different way of dealing with people and then you started to look at people differently and as a result, it was almost like you were steered towards segregation. Then your parents started to hear things like people are converting people, or there would be... the story of the week would be oh it's only black people that do burglaries in our homes. It was that kind of thing but all of that was all from media, from a lot of input of the day-to-day people that had always been there, the influencers. That's what I'd call them [laugh].

I: Coming from a community that was together and now it's sort of going off in its own different tangents, taking their own personal routes, and keeping themselves to themselves.

R: Absolutely. I'll give you an example. Where we lived was a lot of white English people, as soon as we moved there, as soon as the Sikh family... there were black families and so forth, they moved out and it just kept happening. Everywhere we were it was as if that's now an Asian area or a black area or pocketed into areas. It was very sad to see. Upbringing for me was trying to hold onto the togetherness I think to this day.

I: Okay, so this is your childhood. What was lifelike as a teenager in school? Was there an integration or was there a segregation?

R: I think growing up in the 80s and so forth, there was more segregation but there were some undercover events that used to happen. For example, there was a lot of big movement of Bhangra dos and things like that which were in the daytime which made it really... it was quite nice because those events were all people from all backgrounds. They were black, they were white, they were Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, whoever, but we used to meet as teenagers. It was almost going back to that original time. I used to go to quite a few of those which wasn't good because your parents want you to be at school. It was almost like a society within a society, but it was undercover. It was an undercover life [laugh].

I: Your parents, had they integrated or were they very much part of the Hindu culture and just sticking to the Hindu culture at that time?

R: Interestingly enough, we used to be part of a Hindu very strong community ... it was called VHP & RSS sort of organisation that my father was part of however, where it was situated was called the Upton Centre and it was split into two sides, one side was the Hindu VHP site. The next door, literally with a gate between it, was the Afro Caribbean Centre. It was all in one building but separated, so yeah, they were trying very hard to hold onto their culture and their heritage and their backgrounds and that's what we started to see more of. You'd see that and then down the road in Neville Road you'd see a gurdwara suddenly open up, the first one. Then across the road from that was a mosque opening up suddenly, so for me, I think growing up I kept looking around and asking questions. I would ask questions like why can't we go there? Why can't we go to the gurdwara? Why can't we go to the mosque? What's wrong with playing with the children next door who are the Afro Caribbean? That kind of thing. I think those questions... I was quite a strong headed person; it didn't make me very popular unfortunately [laugh].

I: You were very strong and inquisitive.

R: Very strong and inquisitive.

I: Can you please tell us a little bit now of your education. You've done obviously your younger life, you're a teenager and then what education did you take after your GCSEs?

- R:** I was very, very fortunate because our school, Stratford School, had a program where the large stockbroking firms of the city, and banks, used to come to our schools and basically say that you had to go for a series of tests and a series of... it was a bit like the Krypton Factor, I don't know if you've ever seen it, and if you come out at the end of it you would get a job with these banks and so forth. This one fine day, I was 15, and basically, I just went through the whole process and did the interview and the presentations for weeks and months and thinking nothing of it. Oh God, there was too many students, it wouldn't be me I'm not even half as clever as Shahid, or Halima, or Neget or whoever, and I actually got the actual scholarship. I actually got to work for them, so my first job was in June 1985. I was 15, not 16 yet. I finished my GCSEs and straight away went into the world of work with Union Bank of Switzerland. I worked for UBS on the stockbroking floor and literally my life changed because I saw a different part of Britain which I'd never seen before. I was now in the city in Broadgate Circle in Liverpool Street going to work and they were financing my education. Everything changed for me. I ended up being a bit more me quite quickly and was earning money as well.
- I:** You've been awarded your scholarship and you've moved for work.
- R:** Yeah, I didn't move house or anything, but yeah.
- I:** You're still in East London but you're travelling up and down to the city?
- R:** Yeah, it's only a few stops from Upton Park to Liverpool Street.
- I:** How did the people at work... how were they towards you?
- R:** I'll be completely up front; I've never felt warmth... I don't... I can't believe I landed a mentor. It was the first ever mentor of my life, Barbara Paish her name was, never forget her, and somebody that knew about the migration of Asians, who knew about the Commonwealth, who knew about people from other places who were colonised and we are British because the British came to our countries and decided to make us part of their commonwealth so we're as welcome as any other white British. She knew that so she basically took me under her wing and taught me about the theatre, I didn't even know there was theatre, I'd never been to a theatre in my life. Taught me about the stockbroking world, corporate finance, equity, all the different parts of the types of people that do this. They were lawyers, they were investment bankers, and they were people who had homes in central London and had country retreats and things like that. The inspiration around me was unbelievable however, every day at 5:30 or whatever time I finished, it was going home and putting again that mask back on and going into that home and being that good Asian girl again. I think I was good at work, and I was also good at home however, the worlds were completely different. The stops on the underground showed me how different the worlds were because you could see who was getting on every time and getting off on the underground. I was going from a very, very white middle class environment and then it would be like Algate East, Bow Road, Plaistow, Upton Park, you know [laugh] and it would be just completely different people again. I was at a crossroads in my life where I was almost like how do I make these two worlds collide? That's what I wanted.
- I:** So, on one hand you are feeling grounded and feeling a belonging because you've found this beautiful mentor who's accepted you and everything that comes with you and your culture, but you're still fighting these two different worlds in your head and at home.
- R:** Yeah.

- I:** Where did this then take you?
- R:** This took me to an inquisitive world again. UBS gave me actually a secondment where I actually spent six months in India. I got to travel the whole of India because that's what I wanted to do, and they said what is it that you want to do if we gave you a six-month secondment and I said I want to know about my heritage. I said I don't know where I'm from. I felt as if I didn't belong to Britain, I didn't belong to Africa and I didn't belong to India, so where did I belong? I felt as if there was a lot of people like me who didn't know where they belonged, you know, so it took me to a wonderful place cos I could explore and they gave me that option to explore my culture, my heritage, and when I went to India I was in shock because the people in India were not holding onto their culture and their background and their heritage and they were allowed to do the things that I was doing for example, my daytime do's days openly, but the people in Britain who came from this heritage they were we need to keep our culture, we need to keep our heritage, we need to build more mosques, we need to have more Hindu temples, we need our girls back into this, we need our boys... you know, all this. I just sat there in complete astonishment, and I am so glad I found that out because what actually happened is, I turned around and I said you may not belong anywhere, but you do belong because you are just you. Just be you, don't worry about slotting into segments. Don't worry about it you've got enough people out there that can slot you into segments, so you don't need to slot yourself into anything, so that's what I learnt.
- I:** Did you have an Indian language when you sent to India?
- R:** Yeah. At home we spoke Gujarati, I spoke Hindi as well. When I went to India I couldn't read very well I must say, I realised how bad my reading skills were and all the rest of it, but because in India people speak English as well, I found it absolutely... the hustles and bustles of India was amazing, so yeah, I had language and we had to as a family, my dad insisted that we did GCSE in our languages as well so we all had GCEs in our languages which didn't help much when I was in India to be honest, but yeah, cos it was just communication more than anything else.
- I:** Was that like it was a way of your parents keeping on to that culture and instilling it into their children?
- R:** Absolutely. I remember going to Friday classes, VHP classes and I remember standing in the queue. We had to stand in lines, girls on one side, boys on the other. You had to dress right and everything and I remember feeling like a clone. I remember thinking to myself are we just sort of cloning one another. I also remember thinking to myself this is very good discipline and I remember thinking to myself, ooh, my friends from school are going to the scouts and they do similar things like this, or brownies, and I was thinking to myself it's all very similar yet we're trying to segregate it. That brought me back from those days. It was almost like the discipline, the culture, the language, the food, the festivals, all that... thank you, thank you for giving me that foundation because that is who we are. Fantastic, but you can still integrate, and you can still embrace other cultures and backgrounds. I'm not a person to say we're better than you, or you're better than us because as I was saying earlier, I think, all roads lead to the same destination, it's just all different roads, so that's how I looked at it.
- I:** Am I right to say that that trip in India helped you discover yourself and you as a person and did it now lead and take Alka to new paths?

- R:** Absolutely. India changed my life. India gave me a purpose, a motherland, but gave me also the freedom to see how Indians are living and how Indians that have moved on and gone from that sort of motherland, not by choice obviously, they were moved by the British however, it's almost like it should have watered down I thought, and it was actually getting even stronger. It was like a snowball that was just getting bigger and bigger and bigger to the point where everybody that's in a different part of the world wanted to go we are Hindus, we are Sikhs, we are Muslims, you know, and we're better than you, you, you, you, you, you know, and where's all the love, where's the unity, where's all the trust and where's all the collaboration? That's what it taught me, yeah.
- I:** Fantastic, thank you. So, your professional life is blooming...
- R:** Yeah.
- I:** ... and your reaching amazing heights. How was your personal life at this time?
- R:** At the time because I was working for UBS as well, I had a lot of pressure from community and family as well where first born in the UK, girl, she's got a job, she's studying as well, all that kind of stuff. Yeah, there used to be quite a lot of weekends of suddenly mum and dad's friends turning up with their sons and lots of tea parties where people would be literally telling us to go and have a little walk and a little talk with one another, complete stranger guys really. As you can see, I'm quite cocky, I'm quite sort of how I am, so what would happen is I would then quiz them. They would ask me questions when we go for these walks and talks with these different boys every weekend, maybe two or three times a weekend sometimes. They would turn around and say to me, 'Can you cook,' and all that kind of stuff and I used to say, 'Can you cook?' and things like that because it could be good if we both cooked, you know, that kind of thing. They were a little bit like I don't know about this girl, and there was a lot of rejection. That in itself can make you very, very lose your self-esteem as a teenager going into your 20s. For me it was a case of I was doing it to people please and again, I was at a crossroads again. Every time they introduced me it was almost like my daughter works for UBS, and she's been to India and she... you know, it was a bit like putting me on a bit of a pedestal when I was just a down to earth East End girl doing my chores at home, working at work and I don't think I was on a pedestal at the time if you see what I mean. There was a lot of that, and it was a very, very difficult time for me to the point where one fine day I actually came home and one of my friends introduced me to an Asian Hindu boy. Actually, funnily enough he was a Mehta surname as well. I said to my parents let me find my own person type of thing, not really... I didn't know him very well, and they quickly went, 'Oh fantastic, you've found your own person,' and all that kind of stuff and before I knew it, within I think three hours of telling them the next day was my engagement to this guy. I was a bit like gobsmacked. I literally turned up to my house and saw my grandmother there all the way from Leicester. She'd come down and I was just like what's going on? I was a bit shocked by the whole thing. The engagement happened. Unfortunately, we found out that the guy had a girlfriend and so the engagement broke up. I was actually quite chuffed it did break up, but it happened, and I think somebody up there was shining a light really but unfortunately, we did have an engagement and there were sweets passed and all the rest of it, but yeah, I didn't get engaged to this particular guy. I then decided to apply for other roles and my quest was really to... because I was a bit of a disgrace now cos, I had an engagement and now it had broken, so I decided that I was going to apply for roles, and I was going to see where it takes me. Fortunately, I got a job, and it took me to Singapore and Malaysia, and I left the United Kingdom, and I was away from everybody, and I could be me again. That's what happened.

- I:** How did your parents feel about their young Asian girl leaving England to travel by herself?
- R:** Right, so we had a mixed camp. We had a father actually, very strange, who was very very let her go, it's an opportunity and it was quite positive, and a mother who was a bit like where do you think you're going? Who's going to look after you? All this kind of unknown stuff but quite quickly, I think because I was the eldest there were no examples or anything, my father was like the worse that can happen is she can go there, she'll hate it and she'll come back. Yeah, they dropped me off to the airport nicely. I actually went to my training in Kuwait believe it or not, imagine that, and then went from there to Singapore. I arrived at Singapore airport with gum in my mouth. It's actually against the law there to have gum, so you can see I was not a worldly person. You can take a girl out of Upton Park, but Upton Park will not come out of the girl. The first thing that happened as I was coming off the plane, was they said you better take that chewing gum out of your mouth. It was quite hilarious really. I then worked out of there and my best friend at that period of time was my now husband. He then came out there to visit and he was my friend at the time, and he'd known everything about my engagement, he was there all the way through. One fine day on 25th November, he gave me an ultimatum saying are we going to carry on like this, and I turned round, and I said what do you mean, like what? We're still friends and all that kind of stuff and he said, well, I don't take you as a friend. I'm madly in love with you, we need to make this official. I don't see anybody else as Mrs Graham in my life, will you be Mrs Graham? So, I was at another crossroads. Unfortunately, he was not a Hindu boy from the United Kingdom, and he was not vegetarian. He was not all of the things that were ticking the boxes when those boys were coming to see me all of those weekends. That's another story [laugh].
- I:** Okay, so you've been proposed to now by Mr Graham. Can I ask what Mr Graham's heritage is?
- R:** He is Jamaican background.
- I:** So, completely different but a friend, somebody you know, and you come from a very Indian heritage. How did you share the news to your parents?
- R:** Halima, I didn't. Simply didn't. It carried on like this for quite some time. He was going back to the Caribbean and also the UK and just going backwards and forwards and I was just still in Asia. Then it was just so ridiculous and I'm going to be completely up front with you, it was actually my best friend Lina who is Malaysian, she turned round and said to me "we are all here and we're having a lovely time and your mind, and your heart is somewhere else. I'm going to put you on that plane and make you go to where he is, meet his family. Meet everybody that you need to meet. See his life there as in his heritage, his homeland, and then you can always come back and say it's not for you, but this is the perfect person for you." She said that to me. We stayed up for three nights and we talked about it and my husband sent me a ticket and he said, please come and meet my mum and dad, meet my sister, meet my brother, and please just see how we are. I went and it was November. I went there and I couldn't believe his life. He comes from a family who are together who accept anything and everyone and who are homely. They had acres of land. They had farm animals. They ate from their farm. Everything was just unbelievable; I've never seen anything like it. To top it all up, his mother was vegetarian, she was an ecologist, spiritual, she knew a lot about Indian heritage, she had friends who were doctors in the Caribbean and in the medical profession and literally it couldn't have been the most perfect family I could slot into, which if you try to explain that to anybody of Asian descent, of Indian descent, they will never believe it. To add to that, the amount of Indians and Asians that

were in the Caribbean that is just unbelievable. People think it's just a black part of the world and it is definitely not, so that was another story and I actually had Diwali festival there and I had the big celebrations and just met so many wonderful people in a beautiful Caribbean Island.

I: So, the big question is, did you say yes?

R: I said yes, very quickly when I met his mother with open arms and on 25th November, we got married facing the Caribbean Sea just the two of us with two witnesses. No parents from any side. The reason being, he turned round and said to me "I don't want to hear in 30 years' time that my parents were there, and your parents weren't there." We basically... our vows were based on nature. They were based on the sea, the sunrise and that's it. We said that that was our parents. That's how we took it.

I: That's beautiful. Can I just ask what his religious background was?

R: They come from Christianity and his parents both keep the Sabbath, which is today, which is a Friday. They pray on a Friday, so they are Seventh-Day-Adventist.

I: Thank you. When did you share this news with your family?

R: I have to say that all the travelling from Singapore, Malaysia, all the way to Jamaica I made quite a few phone calls home, but I didn't... couldn't say it. I couldn't. I just kept going round in circles. One of my sisters knew everything cos I said if anything happens to me at least one person knows everything. I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything for quite a while, a couple of years. Then in 2000 we came to the UK and that is when my mother and father saw my big wedding ring and my mother said I knew that you were married. I just knew but you didn't say anything, so nobody spoke to me for a little while. I was disowned for a little while.

I: How did they react to you marrying somebody of a Caribbean descent?

R: I think number one, I think the biggest thing was just getting married. It doesn't matter who it was. I think number two was there were a lot of rumours in the community as a result. There were rumours that I was married to a Nigerian Muslim guy, and it just went round. I don't know where that came from. Chinese whispers. There were rumours that I had converted to whatever. First it was Christianity then it was Islam and there were a lot of little community rumours but one fine day, there was a knock at this door where we are now, and my parents were at the door, and I was pregnant with my first son. They came in and my husband said please come in and all the rest of it. They were very pleasantly surprised. I'm not sure if they had this vision of me being in Brixton somewhere with a black guy with a big something in his mouth and maybe loud reggae music or something. I'm not sure if it was like the typical stereotype type of thing, but they were very pleasantly surprised that I was here and the way my husband greeted them. He said that they can come in, he actually made tea for them and everything but unfortunately, that wasn't a very good meeting because although my father was very positive and he was how are you and all that kind of stuff, but my mother was what sort of child is this going to be? One of the things that really hurt me was what's the nose going to be like, and things like that. All of this stems from discrimination, fear, unknown, there's a lot of things that segregated us back in the days whereas if we had stayed as a community they would have known because they would have been speaking to more people from different heritage, but at the time they were too busy separating themselves out to be these wonderful Hindus. Although they were doing wonderful work, lots of service projects and all that kind of stuff, it was targeted

towards their own communities. For me that was very hurtful, and I think my husband did hear that and said to them if they could leave because now this is my wife and she's pregnant and we want a healthy pregnancy, so that didn't go very well.

I: Okay. When you moved back to England where did you move to?

R: We moved straight to here, so South Gloucestershire. The reason why we came over was because my husband had a job role with a company called Horstman, which was an engineering company, so that's why we moved here. We hadn't even seen where we were going to live, and we actually bought the plot online at 20 something year olds. We just knew how much money we had to put down. We knew what we could afford, and we just bought a plot and then it was being built at the time. Crazy eh!

I: Okay, so you've been out of England for a long time, come home to England to a new town, a new community, how did the Asian community or the African community take on this mixed marriage between you and your husband?

R: One beautiful day, May bank holiday, we were given the keys to our house. We had nothing in our house. We had not even a spoon or a mug or a bed or anything in the house. Before anything happened, I opened my suitcase and I put on Indian attire. My husband put on Indian attire too and we found a temple. The first day ever in Bristol, in South Gloucestershire. We went to the temple to ask for a priest to come and bless our home and to have a small ceremony. We left first of all to find it, and secondly to actually go inside. When we arrived at the temple there was a gentleman at the door. Because we called and everything, he said, 'Who have you come to see?' I said, 'Oh, I've come to see the priest and I'd like to make an appointment or get some blessings, we've just bought a new house and just get a few blessings and go back.' 'Okay, and who's that?' I said, 'He's with me.' They said, 'We've had a lot of burglaries in this area, and we've had a lot of issues in this area. You can come in, but the "Karryo" which is a name for a black person, '... he can wait there.' My husband knows quite a bit about our language and background, and he heard that word and he just turned around and walked out of the gate. I said, 'If he's not coming in, I'm not coming in,' so we both left. So, we made our own little ceremony [laugh]. We made our own ceremony. I took some... obviously at the time it wasn't all advanced Google and everything else, so what I knew, what I learnt from my good old VHP & RSS days, my husband did his side, and we did a little ceremony in the middle of the room, and I tell you what, it was as beautiful as our wedding and it's the most memorable thing that I will never forget. Then we were told by a couple of people that live in this area there's a lovely, lovely shop called Rejanis, and you can get some nice spoons and cups and mugs, and we went, and we got a few things, and we slept on the floor for a few days until our bed arrived and here, we are today.

I: So, you took on every obstacle that came your way and you pushed through it and got through it with your husband.

R: And I don't regret any obstacle. I don't regret any of them.

I: It's make Alka what she is today. So, now you're in Bristol, your husband is working for an engineering firm. How is life at home and how is life academically or in your career now?

R: I work with diversity and inclusion. I have a lot of experience in it. I work within human resources, recruitment and so forth. I found that was my passion but what actually happened here was because I had children, I wanted the children to have a place where they belong. When I had my second son, I started a community group which was all

religions. It was actually tagged onto the Sai Association, and the Sai Association teaches love, peace, nonviolence, right conduct... love, truth, peace, right conduct, nonviolence, so five values, and that's what we started to call ourselves really, because we don't have a label, but we wanted our children to experience both our cultures, experience other cultures and be universal, so that's what we wanted, so that was quite a start. It started with about five or six families of mixed heritage. A lot of them were white and Asian. A lot of white and Asian, there was no black and Asian, there was no such thing. Then it grew and grew and grew and grew and we went to over... I think we've been through 500-600 families from all different heritage backgrounds, so yeah, we had to start everything from scratch. Then one fine day I met a lovely guy called Shiv Sama, and he actually came up to me and said I know you're always struggling for places to have your coming together and your events and so forth, and he gave me... he actually said the temple wasn't used and he gave me the keys to the temple. Ironically, the same temple that I was not welcome at, or I was, and my husband wasn't, is the same temple that I got the keys to. I ended up having a lot of different cultures and background people coming to the temple to experience our culture, so yeah.

I: That's fantastic.

R: Yeah.

I: What was lifelike for your children now being of mixed heritage in schools and in the community? Was it okay for them?

R: They were very sort of open to all cultures, backgrounds, and everything but we found that other cultures background were not as open to them, so we had a lot of sort of what are you type of thing. Where's your family from and that kind of thing which for me, I helped them through that by having all the other extended families that came who are of all mixed heritage and backgrounds, so it was absolutely superb. I think I armed them with what they needed to know. We went through a very long phase of them calling themselves Indian, and then we had suddenly them calling themselves black and going through that phase, so we were like you're going through all these phases, but you are best of all worlds. You're best of all worlds. You are West Indian, and you are Indian, so that binds you. The Indian bit binds you but at the end of the day you're all worlds. You're all continents. You are all in a lovely little package, so I think that really helped them. Now, right at this minute, my son has opened up in Oxford University an Asian society, so he could have Asians of all background. He's a member of the Asian society and he's a member of the Afro Caribbean society and what he's trying to do at Oxford, is make sure that all the societies, LGBT, all of the societies, all go to all the other societies events so that everybody can be accepting because obviously, places like Oxford are institutionally set in their ways. So, big things have happened since.

I: The apple hasn't fallen far from the tree.

R: No.

I: Your son hasn't fallen far from your ways and your journey and what you've instilled in them as children.

R: I think it's really important to keep dialogue and communication very open. Very, very open. We talk about everything in our house. There are no doomed subjects or hiding or anything. You be you. If you go through a phase of drill music, you go through a phase of drill music you know. If you go through a phase of Zack Knight and Asian music and all that kind of

stuff, Brit Asian music, you go through that, because all of those aspects are what makes you who you are, and you have to try and be open. If you're going to be an organisation or a person who wants to belong exactly there and stand in one place, you're almost shutting the door to everybody else okay. God has not made all fingers the same and all these different shades of people is a very positive thing. It's a very very positive thing. If we can't learn from mother nature and how the world is actually designed, then we are crazy and very very idiotic individuals [laugh].

I: I feel like Alka's journey is still progressing and there's a saying that it's not the destination it's the journey that gets you there. Where is Alka's journey going now?

R: Right now, I am very much into a phase of my life... I'll give you an example. From when my children were small and I just came to South Gloucestershire and started those societies and so forth, I found that there were a lot of women that were staying at home, and they felt as if their job was only to be homemakers and so forth. What I've actually helped those women to do is make CVs and try and get into jobs and try and contribute and have their life alongside their husbands' careers. That's what I found so that was a little project within the project. The other side as well where there are mixed heritage children where their parents are not sure, this community aspect helps the children to then go and speak to other people rather than their own parents. I'll give you an example. I have lots of young 16, 17, 18 year old girls that I mentor whose parents are either from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or so forth, or even Nigeria, Ghana, but their parents are very, very strict and they have a certain way, so how beautiful is it that if they are going out or they need something that's not what their parents would approve, they have a mentor to go to and they are safe and able to go out and there is somebody that can either go out with them, or pick them up, or whatever, but they don't need to live a lie. For me, that is my calling. My calling is to elevate women, people of different backgrounds to look at and see that we can together do more. I'm at a stage in my life where I do a lot of volunteering, a lot of service alongside my career. It's almost a bit like the career is there and it's there but what can I do to use my skills to then help the community. That's my only calling now, so that's where I'm at, at the moment.

I: Thank you. Thank you Alka for being an amazing advocate for all cultures and all societies. Thank you.

R: Thank you for the opportunity.

Transcript ends mm: ss



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**