

This is Your Heritage –

South Gloucestershire Stories of the Indian Community

Interview: Mohammed Ashfaq Ansari full interview Audio (16-01-2023)

Transcription by Bristol Transcription & Translation Services and edited by a member of the South Gloucestershire Museums Group, 2023.

Interviewer: Hardik Gaurav

Recorder: Hardik Gaurav Type of recording: Film/audio

Location: In 'RooBroo' Restaurant, Thornbury

Interview

I: Interviewer

R: Respondent

I: Good morning.

R: Good morning.

I: So, we are sitting with Mr. Ashfaq, and it is Monday, 16th January 2023, we are sitting inside the beautiful restaurant of Mr. Ashfaq. It is called 'Roobroo', in Thornbury. So, Mr. Ashfaq.

R: Yes.

I: Can you please introduce yourself.

R: My name is Mohammed Ashfaq Ansari.

I: And do you live here?

R: Yes, I live in Thornbury.

I: Thornbury, Bristol okay. And where do you work?'

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R: Roobroo restaurant, Indian restaurant Roobroo.

I: And where were you born?

R: I was born in Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow city.

I: Lucknow city, in Lucknow city and you spent your childhood in Lucknow?

R: Yes. Basically, I was education in Lucknow.

I: Okay. And what did your father do?

R: He was also a chef in Lucknow. Initially he was a chef of the nawabs and after that he worked in a restaurant in Lucknow.

I: Okay.

R: He worked there for 24 years.

I: And in Delhi, which year was this?

R: I joined in 1985, and I worked till 1999 in Maurya. I was sent abroad by the company for promotions as well.

I: Okay. How was your experience in Maurya?

R: It was really nice.

I: How was the staff?

R: The staff and the seniors were nice, everything was good. And I got many chances to go abroad by the company for food promotions. The company used to send me every year. As and when whoever used to get the chance. In this period, I went abroad three times.

I: Where did you go?

R: In 1994, I went to Singapore.

I: 1994, Singapore.

R: In 1997, I went to South Africa - Nairobi.

I: Okay

R: The last tour was to Vietnam in 1999.

I: 1999 Vietnam. So, these were the branches of Maurya?

- R: No, through Maurya we are invited for food festival. Our ambassadors abroad invite the chefs to introduce Indian food to the people.
- I: Okay.
- R: So, the company sends that is why I went there. In 1996 I did a programme on Sony TV as well.
- I: Which programme?
- R: I did food promotion on Sony TV.
- I: Okay. Nice. Very good.
- R: When I came back from Vietnam, my work in England was going fine. So, I had got my visa.
- I: So, you had already applied for UK?
- R: Yes, when I went to Vietnam before that I had applied it. Because there is a restaurant in central London called Red Fort. The owner offered me the job.
- I: Where did you meet them? How did you know them?
- R: He used to often go to India. Mr. Ameen Ali, the owner introduced many chefs from India. He used to go to India and stay in Taj Hotel. The Taj and Maurya are nearby. This is Taj and this is Maurya. He used to come to Maurya a lot. Then, we started meeting each other. I used to be in the [Dum pukht] restaurant in Maurya. He wanted a [Dum pukht] chef. I met him and he asked me would you like to come? I said, yes absolutely I would like to come, if you give me a chance. We generally talked about it, and he submitted the papers, and I got the visa. At that time getting a visa was not tough.
- I: Absolutely, it was not that tough to get the visa.
- R: My base was fine, and I was working in a five star for 16 years so there was no reason for rejection.
- I: How did you become interested in becoming a chef?
- R: Since my father was a chef in Lucknow city. When he left Lucknow and went to the village, he opened a small restaurant over there. In villages we do not have too big restaurants. And I used to work with him. We used to do caterings for weddings and parties. I used to go with him. Basically, I had knowledge about all these things. Then, after that when I came to Maurya Sheraton, the main chef was Imtiaz Qureshi, who has received a President's award in 2017, you might have heard, Imtiaz Qureshi. He was the first chef of

India who got this award by Mr. Pranab Mukherjee. My father and Mr. Imtiaz used to work together in Lucknow. They had two restaurants. My father was the in charge of one restaurant and Imtiaz sir was the in charge of the second restaurant. So, we already had a relationship with him. And after my father died, he offered me, if you want to work you can come, so I went there.

I: What was the name of the restaurant in which you worked?

R: Dum Pukht restaurant in Maurya.

I: Did both used to work there?

R: They worked in the whole hotel, Dum Pukht restaurant, banquets, Bukhara restaurant. Bukhara is also a famous restaurant. Dum Pukht and Bukhara have got best Asian food award.

I: Okay.

R: They used to work in parties in banquets and I worked in Dum Pukht from the beginning till the time I left.

I: What is the pronunciation of Dum Pukht?

R: It means a cuisine which is prepared by giving steam [dum].

I: Okay.

R: It was famous in Lucknow. And Imtiaz sir was also from Lucknow, and we were also from Lucknow. The cooking of two places is very famous in India.

I: Okay.

R: Nawab Hyderabad, Lucknow nawab, and nawab Rampur, which is in Uttar Pradesh.

I: Okay.

R: The cuisines of these three places are very famous. Hyderabad has a little different style; the biryani is prepared with raw meat. And then they give steam [dum]. And in Lucknow they cook the meat and then prepare the biryani. So, in both places dum technique is used. So, it was a mixture of the two because our Imtiaz Qureshi sir was from Lucknow and our director [who was] HS Rehman was from Hyderabad.

I: Okay.

R: So, they introduced both the cuisines.

- I: I did not have this information. I really liked it.
- R: Chef Gordon took interview of Imtiaz sir. He dug the earth and cooked lamb by giving it dum.
- I: Gordon Ramsey?
- R: Yes, he took the interview.
- I: That is wonderful.
- R: Mr. Imtiaz is still our boss. He still works in Maratha Sheraton, Mumbai. He is working with the company until now, and he has a lifetime contract with the company.
- I: Great.
- R: He joined the ITC in 1976 in Agra. ITC opened Agra Maurya Sheraton and the company did the contract with him for lifetime that we will never let you leave. He is still connected with ITC, and he is in Maratha Sheraton, Mumbai now.
- I: He is the king of recipes.
- R: Many family members like his sons, nephews are doing this job. One of his sons has three restaurants in Mumbai. And the other two sons are doing consultancy. The whole family does this work.
- I: And you worked under him?
- R: Yes, I have worked under him. I have worked with his nephews and other family members. I have worked with his son- in- law chef Ghulam [s.l. Sabir]. I always used to be his assistant.
- I: We can say that your main learning started from Maurya.
- R: Yes. From 1985 to 1999 I was in Maurya, and it was a very good experience. I had a good response from there and a lot of respect. I must say that.
- I: And when you were in Vietnam you got selected, no not selected you applied, and you came to UK.
- R: Yes.
- I: In which year did you shift to UK?
- R: I came to UK on 19th September 1999.

- I: Okay. What was your first memory in UK when your plane landed, how did you feel?
- R: I never thought I will go abroad. The people who worked in Maurya and many people whom I met wanted to. Because I never thought in first 14 years that I will, because company used to send us from time to time. I got many chances. When I resigned, they asked me to join the management because I had made up my mind to go abroad.
- I: So, you were used of living abroad?
- R: Yes
- I: Okay.
- R: I thought I should get some experience of living in abroad, so I came to UK.
- I: You came to UK in September 1999.
- R: Yes, in September 1999.
- I: What was the name of restaurant?
- R: Red Fort restaurant.
- I: Red Fort restaurant.
- R: Central London, 77, Dean Street.
- I: So, you settled here. Did you feel any difference in the culture of London and India in terms of customers?
- R: The culture is very different. There is a big difference in cooking as well. In India people prefer meat with bones; here people prefer meat without bones. This is the main difference because this makes a difference in the taste, as the juice of the bones enhances the taste of the dish.
- I: Okay
- R: But because people do not like it here, so we must adjust it.
- I: So, may be one dish is included in the menu.
- R: Yes. There are some dishes in which I use the juice of the bones, like in Lamb Shank. So, it is flavourful.
- I: In many good restaurants they include Lamb Shanks.

- R: Yes. You should try at our place. Then, you should give feedback. You must have eaten at other places as well. I do not want to blow my own trumpet, but you should try once. Especially, since I am from Lucknow, with God's grace I am good at making biryani. Whenever, I have made it, it has never failed. I got the help from God and my boss. It has the name of Imtiaz sir and Lucknow.
- I: This is a kind of a legacy.
- R: Yes, because if I fail in making biryani then it will spoil the name of my boss and Lucknow.
- I: It is very interesting.
- R: It is the grace of God people like my biryani, and I am successful in it.
- I: People like it.
- R: It has never failed. Similarly, I can say this for Lamb Shanks also. There is a chicken dish 'Murg Handi Lazeez' we use the juice there; we make soup and use in that instead of water. So, we serve it in the same way as we used to serve in Dum Pukht. We do not use the powdered spices from outside. We buy whole spices and grind it ourselves. We take care that how much quantity should be used in a particular dish.
- I: That makes it even more fresh.
- R: Yes, it becomes very fresh. Because we do not get the flavour from the spices (Garam Masala) brought from outside. We know how much quantity should be used in it. This is the main thing; it enhances the flavour.
- I: Right.
- R: When I am cooking here, then the people come from outside and tell that the aroma is nice.
- I: True. Fresh.
- R: We roast the spices since they are soggy and then it enhances the flavour even more.
- I: You came here, how much time did it take for you to adjust here with the people and culture?
- R: It did not take much time.
- I: Okay

- I: How did you find your community over here? Through your boss or how did you find your own people?
- R: Many people from Maurya had come here before me also.
- I: They were from Maurya. So, you knew them?
- R: Yes, I knew them. We had our staff in [Chutney Mary] restaurant. You must have heard its branch Veera Swamy in Piccadilly. You must have heard the name of [Chutney Mary] restaurant. It was in [Fulham Broadway] the main branch, which is no more, now they have opened a very big restaurant in Green Park. I know the owner, Ms. Namita Panjabi.
- I: What is the name of the owner?
- R: Ms. Namita Panjabi, Chutney Mary. They have many branches, Maurya....
- I: In London?
- R: Yes, in London. They have many restaurants, but Chutney Mary is one of the biggest. I have many friends over there. There were lots of people who had come from Maurya and Taj. Since they were close by, I knew the staff. So, I knew many people here.
- I: So, you did not face any difficulty in adjusting?
- R: Yes. I got to know about my community.
- I: They helped you.
- R: Yes. I worked at different restaurants.
- I: Where was your family at that time?
- R: When I came here my family was in Delhi. But because my children were very small. My son was very young, and my wife could not take care of my children alone so she said I will stay with my mom and dad. So, she adjusted there. Because she needed support. If I had any brother there, then he would have helped. That is why they could not stay. My elder brother used to live Lucknow but he had a government job so she could not adjust there. She adjusted with her mother and father, and she lived there.
- I: For how many years did you work in London?
- R: I worked in London for many years, I think till 2010.
- I: 10-11 years. From 1999 till 2010.

R: I stayed there till 2011. In 2012.....

I: Okay.

R: Then I went to [Wales]

I: You worked in the same restaurant in London?

R: No, I worked at different restaurants. Let me tell you that I used to go on holidays in 3 – 4 months, as no chef could be retained for so long and had to be replaced. But I did not face any difficulty in getting job, I get job within one week. If I apply for job or ask people, I can get the job.

I: Because you have so much experience.

R: The people who want to work hard, they get job here. So, I never faced any difficulty. So, I used to go on a holiday for 2 – 3 months and then I used to get a new job after coming back. I came to Bristol in 2015.

I: You came to Bristol in 2015.

R: Since, 2015 I am in Bristol. There is a Ganesha restaurant at Bedminster Parade, I worked there for five years and then I met with Ramdev from the in Roobroo restaurant. I used to live at their place only.

I: Okay.

R: On rent. After Covid, the situations became bad, so I refused Ganesha and came to Roobroo.

I: When Roobroo started here?

R: It was started in 2020. And I came here in 2021.

I: Do you have a partnership?

R: No, I am the chef. Mr. Ramdev is the owner.

I: But you knew him?

R: Yes because he came to Ganesha. He used to work in Za Za Bazaar. I knew him. He was my friend that is why I used to live with him. He had kids and family and if a person is alone, you can spend good time with the small children. You become like a family member. You do not feel lonely.

I: When you started here, I think Covid also started at the same time.

- R: Yes, Covid period was there. When the restaurant opened, initially it started with a Takeaway. The main was not allowed, so it was just Takeaway. Then, when the government allowed then we started the restaurant. Initially the response was not so good, due to Covid. Then, I suggested him to distribute the leaflets and then the people became aware of this place.
- I: You gave the suggestion.
- R: Many people still do not know about it. Just day before yesterday a customer came here and asked when did you open? It has been 3 years since the time the restaurant has been opened. He lives nearby but I came here for the first time.
- I: This happened due to Covid.
- R: To become famous, you need to promote it and make people aware about the restaurant. Few things will be negative there is nobody who is 100%. I am also not 100%. There is always scope for improvement.
- I: So, you started getting recurring customers?
- R: Yes, the restaurant has been established.
- I: Did you get anything from the government during Covid?
- R: Government was giving 50%. Customers got 50% off.
- I: Okay. Job retention. Did workers get job retention scheme?
- R: 80% salary was given by the government in Covid.
- I: So, it was safe.
- R: Because everything stopped in Covid and how will the owner pay? So, the government helped. 80% salary was paid by the government. The government really helped in Covid.
- I: So, your family is in India right now?
- R: Yes.
- I: Who is there in your family?
- R: My wife, my daughter, and my son.
- I: Do they want to live there?

R: Yes. When I talk to my son, he says I do not want to go abroad. He is grown up now, initially he wanted to but now he has done some research about living abroad and some of his friends have gone abroad so he gets information from them about the life here.

I: That life is not easy here to live abroad.

R: True. My son wanted to study Mass Communication. He took admission in Delhi. He stayed there for 2-3 months but could not do it. He did not like it. He came back and wanted to do Hotel Management. I said that I know you will not be able to do it. He said I will do it. He joined Hotel Management in Lucknow and in one and a half months he came back from there also. I knew it. Then, he said I want to prepare for IAS [IAS = Indian Administrative Service, the Indian civil service]. I said you can choose your career according to your wish. Because you are more educated than me. I have studied in Hindi medium, and he has studied in English medium. You have more knowledge than me and you can take the best decision for yourself. So, he is doing the preparation for IAS and my daughter is preparing for NEET [NEET = entrance test for medical colleges in India.]

after finishing school.

I: Okay. Like your son said he does not want to come here, and do you think in comparison to when you came here is it difficult to establish yourself here now?

R: No, I do not think it is difficult. If you are qualified in any area, you can work here, and if he wants to come here it is his choice. If he gets a chance to come here for a job, I will never say no. And if he does not want to come, he can try there. I hope he gets successful. He is well educated; he can do his own business.

I: Absolutely

R: He can establish himself in business, it is not important that everyone must do service. We can try business also.

I: You never know where life will take you.

R: Yes. He is doing a small leather business with his friends. That is on the side. He is getting experience. He earns something and takes out his expenses. If he fails in the exams, then...

I: Okay, so he is doing it.

R: He will still try two three times, but he fails then he will do business.

I: I think you should have a backup plan with you.

R: Yes, he has it in his mind; that if I cannot pass the exam then I will do business. I said I will help you in your business. Leather gets exported from UK; you can try in that.

I: How frequently do you visit India?

R: Every year.

I: In winters or...?

R: Yes, mostly in winters because I get sick over there and the atmosphere does not suit me. I have been here for 22 years so whenever I go there, I get sick. The atmosphere here suits me. I do not know why I get sick over there; it is my motherland.

I: Your body has got used to it.

R: But still, I get sick. I recently went there, and I was sick for one month. I came back sick. My wife said, stay here but I did not.

I: Your body has adopted the weather of UK.

R: I am diabetic also, so I had to come here for my medicines and treatment and did not want to delay that. As soon as I came here, I was fine within a week.

I: What is your long-term plan after you retire? Would you like to go back?

R: Obviously, my family is there so I would like to go there but if my son will come here then we will settle here.

I: Okay.

R: If my son will come here, then there is no point of going there. I will call my daughter also here.

I: Okay. Your home is where your family is.

R: Yes.

I: You will not say that your permanent home is in UK. Your home is over there.

R: Yes, because I could not bring my family here, so I did not make my house here. Why should I make a house just for myself.

I: Okay. Thank you.

R: Thank you, sir.

I: It was very nice.