

Spinning Lifestyles – Surma Elders Group

Maybe what we could start off by doing is going around and saying our names. I'm Judith. Who's going to start, the chairman?

I'm Mohammed and am new to this Borough.

When did you come here?

I came here a long time ago, but I never lived in Tower Hamlets. It is four years that I've been living here in this Borough.

4 Years? Where did you come from?

I come from Bangladesh.

Four years ago?

No I came nearly 30 years ago and have been living in Tower Hamlets for four years.

So where did you live when you came from Bangladesh?

Edinburgh, Scotland and Aberdeen, those sort of areas and after that Highgate and Hampstead Heath.

What took you to Edinburgh?

It is a long story. This is the first time in the Borough and even for four years I have seen dramatic changes and since the Olympic Games were given to London it has accelerated, the improvements and developments faster than expected. Hopefully, it will be better for Tower Hamlets.

What brought you to Tower Hamlets?

It is very personal!

That's fine!

Since I', visually impaired I was forced to come here.

What changes have you seen since you first arrived 4 years ago?

I can't see much but before that I used to drive around passing through and things were more or less derelict, now it's changed so much, it's beyond belief. My friends and family tell me of the changes too. I go to their houses and I can't recognise their houses. So much development. The Bengali community has become middle class. So many Bengali's have worked their way up. They are now no longer working class, they have got a taste of western life so they are trying to adapt. Even in their own houses it shows.

In what way, that is really interesting, do you all feel that way? Can you give me an example of that?

Friends, when they came here, they are all singles so they used to get together 8 or 9 people to a house eating or cooking together. It's like a male bonding society. That has changed because since 70's, 80's they have started going back home and getting married and bringing their wives buying a house. And since belonging started creeping to their minds of their life in the UK they say England. Their children are born here and going to the school. England, not Bangladesh, Bangladesh any more. But the parents still say Bangladesh, Bangladesh. There is conflict again. It is good. I think it is good. It is a positive sign and at the moment as the parents are better off mentally and financially they are also supporting their children's education.

I noticed myself 15 years ago the parents never thought of sending their children to school. It was not their main object, but now every single Bengali family makes sure their children go to school. That is why I notice that the standard of education in all Tower Hamlet schools has risen dramatically. Especially the O'Level it used to be dreadful. Now it is positive. It is like if you go to New York, all the Italian families come from Italy but now they are New Yorkers. The Bengali people in Brick Lane and Tower Hamlets start to feel they are English.

What about anybody else, which way are we going to go around?

My name is ??? I was born in Tower Hamlets. I was born in the 1970's all my family are here. My family comes from Bangladesh around 1968 or 1969 they arrived here.

Is that your father and your mother?

Yes!

Do they ever talk about when they came over and what it was like?

Not really no! I was brought up in Stepney. I went to a local school in Stepney Green. So I'm a local person. The changes I've seen. A lot of things. I think the environment I can remember all around in Stepney. Where we lived in a big house, there were three families in one flat. We had a big garden I can remember daffodils and flowers. We used to go to one area to another area. I used to remember these big Ford Cortinas and play football. There used to be more freedom. More going out and taking risks.

Do you think it was safer?

Yes, if you wanted to do something else. As I say I was born here and will probably stay here because my family is here.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

I have 2 brothers and 1 sister. My sister is the eldest, she used to live with us, but she has gone to Hendon. I have got 2 other brothers and they are still with us. We will still be here.

Have you been back to Bangladesh?

Yes, I have been to Bangladesh.

And what's the difference? What were your first feelings when you arrived in Bangladesh? How different was it to...?

Very strange. One of the first things I saw walking out of the airport was hundreds of people.

Mohammed

That's my experience. Too many people and the heat on my face. Highly populated. And you see so many people coming towards you. That really frightens me and I felt also that you are a foreigner in your own country. That's the one thing I felt.

- 2 The baby taxis, the rickshaws. I felt very awkward in the baby taxis as in Bangladesh there is no such thing as a highway code.

I've been to India so I know!

- 2 As for the rickshaws, they don't have a highway code, but who cares. If you get killed you get killed. Everything was fresh, the food and you can smell the food as well. In this country it's alright but it doesn't smell. Also I noticed that there is a lot more types of food that you can get in Tower Hamlets. Many years ago you wouldn't see a lot of Bangladeshi food, but now you see a lot more. In every shop you go into you see a lot of fruit from Bangladesh. Vegetables, potatoes and also from other countries.

Do you remember what your mother used to cook many years ago. She must have found it difficult to buy...?

Rice or meat curry. I think for me growing up in Tower Hamlets I think I'll stay or remain in Tower Hamlets. A lot of my friends from school are still here and they brought their families here. They have problems and doubts, but they all come back to Tower Hamlets. I mean they can go somewhere else like Birmingham or Barking, but it seems that Tower Hamlets is like a magnet. They always come back.

Mohammed

There were a lot of cinemas, now there are not. Every Sunday all the Bengalis would get together and go to the cinema. This was the moment for the whole week.

- 2 We still surround ourselves. A lot of things have changed- Docklands, the LDDC came in, when all of it was just a mess and the LDDC came in and

built it all up, we saw all that, so I think I see a lot of people going out, young children going out and enjoying themselves.

OK. When did you come to the UK

3 In 1977. Oh sorry! I came from Bangladesh

And what was it like when you first came here? Did you come by plane?

No. I'm not here. 2 years I've been here, before that I was in Bradford.

What took you to Bradford? Was it work?

My family was there.

And when did your family come to Bradford or the UK?

They came here in 1963. My father came here in 1976. My brother came here in 1977.

So it was a long time until you saw your father? He went to Bradford to work? What did he do?

Factory work.

I interviewed quite a few people a few months ago, who were working in mills and factories, textiles, and their health was very bad from the long hours and hard work. So what was it like when you first came to Tower Hamlets?

Better than before. At the moment it's better.

What was better?

I came in 1979 to Tower Hamlets

Things were quite difficult in 1979. Quite a few marches. We have a picture here of one of the marches.

1 He used to work in the Savoy Hotel

Did you? So what did you do in the Savoy?

I worked in the staff canteen. Things have got better

So! Things have got better over time? Has the Borough got better over time? Do you think it is better now for the Bangladeshi community that it was then?

Yes!

It must have been very difficult in 1979?

A lot of ???.

Was it difficult working in the Savoy with the language barrier?

(Bengali is spoken). His manager was very understanding. He said just to take it slowly.

Would you move out of Tower Hamlets?

No! I know my way around. If I go to a new place it would be hard for me.

Who's next?

- 5 I can't speak English. I have a big problem. I came for the first time in 1977. My father is Staff Sergeant. He was in the Second World War. 3 people in my family died under the water, in 1943/44. 2 brothers and one brother-in-law. My brother-in-law worked on a ship. After the War finished and England didn't have many men. The Bangladeshis came over to work, but they didn't save their money. Some people are working in Birmingham and Leeds in a factory. Not textiles but making steel or iron.

How long did you work in the steel factory for?

Not me! I worked in an Indian Restaurant in the kitchen in Piccadilly Circus, Ealing Common, Upminster, Essex and Surrey and Cheam. Then later I had problems with cooking in a kitchen as I had problems with my eyes. 12 years ago I'm not working because now I can't see. The most problems were when I started cooking and when I was born I had problems with my eyes.

Where were you born?

In Bangladesh! I came in 1977.

How old were you?

Nearly 20

And did you come with your family?

Yes!

What was it like when you first came here?

When I came the first time I was a little scared. Because when I went to work I speak no English you know. Then after 6 months working I felt a bit better. Then after one or two years I was running across London.

Then I am not scared, I have a happy life. (laughs)

What did you enjoy about London? The lifestyle? Going to films?

I enjoy my work, I was happy. Before there was racial harassment. Many problems. Now maybe about 10-12 years it is fine. But there is new technology, but I can't see it.

Have you been back to Bangladesh at all since 1979?

Many times.

Is it very different?

Yes, very different!

What do you find is very different between Bangladesh and Tower Hamlets?

Bangladesh is very busy; too crowded. People don't know how to display shop there. If you get pushed there are no apologies. I'm not complaining.

It's different.

My grandfather worked on a British ship.

Did you work on a ship as well?

Yes!

Which ship did you work on?

In the kitchen. No my grandfather and father worked on ships.

Your family fought hard in the war?

Yes

It's very important that we talk about this as they were part of the British Army and they died.

It was a long time ago that my grandmother died. About 20 years ago.

- 3 Unfortunately we have never kept any record of anything and it is lost forever. Back home they don't think about history. In Bangladesh they believe it is fate why his family members died. There is no blame. God has taken him.

Do the younger generation still think that everything is still down to fate?

It still hasn't changed, because although they are born here. The parents were not born here. The parents talk of fate and God. If it is God's will that I do not see then so be it. It is because of diabetes that I am blind, but the parents see it as fate. That's the difference.

Does that make you religious?

Because they are less educated and do not know about diabetes they believe more in God and fate. If I had known that I was a diabetic I could have taken precautions and today I could sit here and have a nice chat and see you.

Hopefully, now there is more information on that.

As you know, about 70% of all Bangladeshi's living in the UK live in Tower Hamlets.

Were you born in Bangladesh?

6 Yes!

So when did you come to the UK?

Just over 15 years ago.

Did you come with your family?

I came with my parents.

What part of the UK did you come to?

Tower Hamlets

What did your dad do?

Factory worker.

What factory did he work in?

His parents

Have you seen a lot of changes in Tower Hamlets?

I've seen changes here.

- 2 There are far more Bengali shopkeepers than 10 years ago. There are far more Bengali teachers. Before, you would not have seen families taking their children to school. Now it has changed. They realise that education is the main thing. I think it has been drummed into them. I don't think the youth of today are becoming westernised, but I think they are adapting.
- 1 Now Halal is everywhere, in my time, there was no such thing as Halal. When I came, the first time I started to eat Halal was a long time after. Now the only thing you can buy is halal.

It is really exciting when Khalid (Person 2) said about all the shopkeepers. It must have been difficult growing up where you couldn't buy products of your own culture. When I was in India the food was very different to what it is here.

1 It's adapted, anglicised.

Do you eat very different food at home to what is cooked in the restaurant?

2 Pasta, tuna pasta, pasta with everything. So everything has changed. My mum never eats the pats. Pizzas as well.

5 There are a lot of mosques here in London because it is a multi-cultural city

Would you say that it is home here in London. It is always a difficult question?

2 I was born in Stepney so I'm a Stepneydeshi.

1 Although I'm first generation I am anglicised from home.

When you say you were anglicised from home, was that because of your parents?

Yes! When I came from the airport my friends said, oh look at that they are not driving in the middle of the road. But now it's changed. I could speak English before I came here and that's why I didn't like it when I lived in America. That's why I didn't stay. No matter where I go still when I get back to London I feel that I can at last put my feet up.

That's great, so London is home! I spent a lot of time in Krell India and I spent some time interviewing them about their time in the East End of London. They had retired back to Bangladesh. Do you find that that a lot of people retire back to Bangladesh?

Here it is difficult to live on your pension over here, but in Bangladesh it's a luxurious life.

5 If you rented a flat in Dakha if you pay £700 per month it's a good flat. It's getting very expensive now. 80,000 rupees a month.

1 You are talking about up market property. People there have their home in the countryside. £70 is alot of money.

I interviewed someone not that long ago who said to me that quite often the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets and London were sending money back home, but they were also investing more money in Dakha. Now they buy property.

5 As I have a wife and children now, why should I send money back to Bangladesh. What for? Because my home is here, my family is here, there's no need. Young people don't send money back to Bangladesh.

Do you think that is really sad that the younger generation are losing the connection with Bangladesh?

- 1 It's inevitable!
- 2 If you go out of the airport in Bangladesh the people there say you are British, even if you stay there for a couple of weeks.
- 1 If it is a 5 rupee rickshaw I get charged 10 of course. But that's only 10p. But my family they really get angry. Oh you came for 2 weeks and you get asked for more rupees than necessary.
- 2 It's a strange experience, but when you come back you feel different. My mum actually works in Spitalfields farm

Sorry! Your mum actually works in Spitalfields farm?

Yes! She has been working there for 5 years. She brings fresh vegetables home.

Is that what she used to do in Bangladesh?

I don't know!

Has that made her happier in the UK?

When we came here in 1970 we had a big garden and were able to grow vegetables.

It must have been more difficult for the women. The men went to work whilst the women stayed in.

- 2 I remember the National Front coming in.

Do you remember the National Front?

I was in secondary school in the 80's and there were a lot of BNP and National Front beating people up.

- 1 one day they pushed me.
- 5 All the time they targeted Brick Lane.

They were very frightening times?

- 4 People change.

Thank you so much, what you have told us was so interesting!