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Summary of an interview conducted as part of the South Asian Heritage Project

Funded by the Heathrow Community Engagement Board (HCEB)

Interview conducted by interviewers from the University of West London.

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## HCEB South Asian Oral History Project Interview 6

Date: 28 March 2022

Time: 13.07

Place: Online

Interviewers; Anne-Marie Purcell and Jane Rae Ross, UWL (University of West London)  
Archives

Interviewee: Asad Parkar

Document reference: UWLA/HCEB/06/002

Asad found out about the project in two ways. One of his colleagues who works on the 'enhance network' told him about the project, and he saw the PDF posted online on the team site at work. He was interested in participating because he is South Asian himself and he felt it was important to record and document the evidence of people who work at Heathrow, who work locally, people who are affected both as employees and those who are affected by it. He also uses the airport for travel.

Asad was born in Mumbai, India, 1996. He spent most of his childhood there, moving to the UK (United Kingdom) in December 2005. His Dad had got a job there. He completed the initial visa process, returned to India, and finished the year of Year 3 which is equivalent to Year 4 here. Then he came back to the UK in April 2006 where he went into Year 5 at Ryvers Primary, finished Year 6, and then went to Burnham Grammar School. where he did Years 7-13. After finishing school, Asad went to Brunel University where he did his masters degree. He has since finished the graduate scheme at Heathrow and is now in his permanent role there.

Asad's very first experience of Heathrow was in 2004 when he and his family took an extended holiday to Europe. They went to France where they stayed in Paris for a week, had a few days in Switzerland, and stayed in London for a week and a bit. He either arrived at Terminal 3 (T3) or Terminal 4 (T4) as Terminal 5 (T5) did not exist yet. It was his first time coming to a western country as a child. He remembers being quite excited as he has always loved planes. He does not remember much about the airport itself, but he does remember the Heathrow Express quite vividly as they did not have subways or anything like it in Mumbai. He was thrilled to be on a train that went through tunnels. It was fascinating and exciting for him as a child and as someone who has loved engineering all their life. The transfer through the airport was his first experience of the UK.

It was probably not as efficient as it is today as it was still state owned. In terms of efficiency, it was not as efficient as it is today, but he does not remember anything negative. It was still mostly positive. Staff interaction was nice.

Heathrow is very different to Mumbai. He remembers Mumbai airport vividly. It was only five or six years ago that it got a new terminal. He remembers it being basic, the layout was poor, it was a case of make do, and the terminal was a horseshoe shape. This was not the best for passenger flow as passengers had to navigate this to get to various points such as passport control. There were a lot more steps. At Heathrow, immigration is only done on arrival, in India, immigration is done on arrival and departure. Now Mumbai airport is focusing more on customer service, passenger amenities are

important, there is access to duty-free whereas before they did not have any of this. The passengers experience is really important, and airports are focusing on that now.

Asad joined Heathrow in September 2019 on the graduate engineering team, formally called the Engineering Future Leaders Scheme. It was originally a two-year rotational scheme, rotating within the different departments. For the first few months he was heavily shadowing, the airport control engineers in the operations centre looking at active performance, technical sides, etc. March 2020 when Covid pandemic hit, he had only been with the company five/six months, so he was helping the engineering resilience team with the Covid response from the UK perspective at the airport. April 2020, he was furloughed for around four months till mid-July, returning at the end of July. From then, he worked in several different departments before 'ending up' in his current role as an engineering resilience partner. As part of their remit, the engineering resilience department is responsible for contingency planning for engineering assets across the airport, for example making contingency plans should an emergency or incident occur so that staff have a process to follow. They also respond to incidents, coordinating command and control, and early response to incidents. The department also works closely with the airport's central resilience team, transport service providers and others.

Asad applied to as many companies as he could as it is a cutthroat market, even before Covid, not just for graduate jobs but for any job, especially in engineering. He remarks that there is a constant high demand for engineers, and it is extremely hard to have the knowledge and experience before going into a role. Initially when applying for the Grad schemes, not just Heathrow but as many companies as possible to give him the best chance of getting a job. Heathrow was just one on the list of companies that he applied to for employment. The more he went through the process (recruitment), the more he realised that he would love to work here (Heathrow). It is quite exciting. Few people get to say that they work at an airport, go to the airside, and look at planes every day. The office is very different to a traditional office environment, where someone sits at their desk every day. Asad acknowledges that although he is sitting at his desk while giving the interview, he could have chosen to give it airside or from the control tower. He comments that the more he went through the recruitment process at Heathrow, the more he started to feel that he would genuinely like to work here. At the assessment centre, he met one of his colleagues who had also been at university with Asad but had graduated the year before and had a chat with him because they had not seen each other since university. Asad thinks that seeing him helped, his friend was enjoying himself there. Asad also mentions meeting other staff there, the people who were interviewing him, those assessing him, and people who were running the day in terms of logistics. He mentions that everyone seemed nice and for him it is important that not only should he enjoy going to work but that he should enjoy working with the people

there. The face-to-face interaction during the recruitment process really enforced that. He received the offer, and, in his heart, he knew that he wanted to work at Heathrow, but he had already accepted another offer. He felt bad about reneging on the offer that he had accepted from the other company, but he knew that Heathrow was where he wanted to work.

Asad has opportunities to progress in his work. He comments that he believes that there were more opportunities pre- Covid, however, these may be fewer, but they are still there. He also mentions that Heathrow currently has a massive recruitment drive because they are 'ramping up' in terms of operations. Terminal 2 (T2) and Terminal 3 (T3) have re-opened and he is sure that Terminal 4 (T4) will re-open soon so getting back the expertise and talent lost back somehow. Asad explains that Heathrow is keen to retain talent so he will have opportunities and that his director is a supporter of the graduate scheme. The graduate scheme is an effective way of nurturing new talent and retaining them is important as recruitment is expensive especially when trying to hire experienced engineers. The graduate scheme brings in 'fresh thinking', 'growing' talent and expertise. He adds that he knows that he will have career progression opportunities, that they are, but now he is not sure what these will be.

Asad is happy with his current role so far. Resilience engineering was not something that he envisaged working in. He did not know that core resilience engineering existed before joining Heathrow. When he joined, he did not envisage himself in a permanent role either. It was challenging settling into the role because he was learning new things. However, he knew he had the technical knowledge as he has a masters degree in engineering. He notes that it becomes job specific, for example, how to write a contingency plan, formatting it correctly, learning how to obtain information from people. It has been particularly challenging but extremely rewarding. Resilience engineering is specific and there are few people who can say that they have done it. Asad is enjoying it so far. He does not want to do a job where he becomes comfortable. He would rather do one where he is challenged, keeps him engaged and pushes him to do better.

Asad lives close to the airport. He never considered location as a primary factor in applying for jobs. However, now that he has worked at Heathrow, it is a twenty-minute drive door-to-door on a good day depending on traffic, he has seen the importance of it. If he had a long commute, he would be less inclined to go to work to have face-to-face interactions with people. Asad mentions that he is an extrovert and that interaction with people is especially important to him. He comments that he struggled with being isolated from his work colleagues and remote working during the initial stages of the pandemic. He missed going for a coffee and talking to people in person. He also mentions that if there is an emergency, he can be at work in twenty to 30 minutes and

that he can be home at that time after a long day at work. When he did have to come into work during the pandemic, the roads were much quieter, so it was a blissful commute. Now that everything is getting back to normal, the roads are busier and there is roadworks everywhere. He sometimes hates the commute in the morning now because he must take so many different routes to work. It was better at the start. He adds that he can see the planes coming into land and taking off from his bedroom window. It is the same as his grandparents' house in Mumbai, so he has always been around planes and the airport and loves it.

Asad comments that parking for airport employees is good. Each office building has its own carport and there are additional colleague car parking facilities on the perimeter roads for T4, T3, T2 and T5. The airport encourages employees to use public transport and car share. [Sound was lost on the recording at this point.] When the sound returned, Asad mentions that it meant people did not need to worry about finding parking spaces. Asad acknowledges that his comments on public transport are based on his colleague's experience as he does not use it. There is a bus from Slough which goes through Hounslow, then onto the main office building and other landside buildings. There is also the number seven from Maidenhead which goes to the main terminal building. A lot of people commute on TFL and the underground. In addition, Heathrow also encourages sustainable transport through offering cycle hire and an electric car hire scheme if people do have to drive. He notes that there are a lot of transport provision options to suit individual choice and needs.

Asad was asked to comment on air quality pre-Covid, during Covid and post-Covid. He acknowledges that he is not the most technical person on this topic but will do his best. In terms of noise, the first thing that he noticed was how quiet it was. Slough is not in the direct takeoff or landing paths, so it is not that noisy even, so it was noticeably quieter. In terms of the air quality, he notes that he believed it was better as there was less aircraft movement. Pre-covid, for those in the aircraft paths, air quality and noise would be an issue. The airport is aware of this, especially for local communities in the immediate vicinity of the airport. This is a big goal for Heathrow, not just for future expansion but for current infrastructure in terms of sustainability, air quality, noise reduction, and becoming a carbon zero/carbon neutral business. Heathrow is doing its best to achieve this. However, the bulk of the impact on this is due to the aircraft. Asad notes that the airport has no control over this because it is the airlines that decide how many and which type of aircraft to fly. This makes it hard as local people think it is the airport that is responsible for air quality. He mentions the government, the use of new fuel types, alternative fuels, and new aircraft. Heathrow has air quality monitoring and local pollution control in place. Asad remarks that although Heathrow is doing its best to control, improve and monitor these, it is sometimes 'easier said than done.'

Asad really enjoyed travelling through the airport as a passenger before he joined the company. His favourite terminal is T5 probably because he has used it the most. He is comfortable with it both as a passenger and as an employee. He likes the sense of familiarity which he believes is present across all Heathrow's terminals. He notes that this is quite important for passengers. He notes that passengers want easy way finding, easy access to facilities and welfare, a good selection of food and beverage outlets, duty free, fashion and retail outlets. Asad remarks that he has always enjoyed travelling through all Heathrow's terminals that he has used. It has been a nice experience. It has not stressed him out that much. The only recent time was last November (2021) when he went back to India with his grandmother. She cannot walk far so they always request a wheelchair. This was a bit challenging as T3 is an old terminal, so the layout does not help with directing passengers to that area (support for passengers). He mentions that they had to walk a bit, then take a lift, then walk a bit more to get to the required zone so it was challenging. However, he goes on to mention that his experiences as a passenger have been positive because passengers know what to expect, for example, if they have little time between connections. Every time he travels to other airports, he subconsciously compares them to Heathrow.

Asad's trip in November 2021 was the first time he had travelled since the pandemic started. He notes that it was a bit odd with the multiple tests. He comments that it did not give him anxiety, it was just unfamiliar because there is more to consider, for example, booking a test, avoiding people before and after the test, which is not something that is usual before travelling. There was a lot more to consider which did not help, especially for a family of four. He acknowledges that his case was different because he has family in India. He notes that it would be challenging for a family just going for a holiday. They would want to be relaxed not worrying about booking tests, passenger locator forms, ever changing entry requirements, vaccination requirements. When he landed in India, Omicron kicked off. He had a bad cold and sore throat before returning so he was worried that his test would be positive. This would mean that he would not be able to travel but neither would his entire family as they shared a house. This gave him anxiety. His parents had had to travel before as they had both lost one of their parents during the pandemic but for Asad and his sister it was their first time travelling since the pandemic, so the additional travel requirements were new to them.

Asad's experience last November (2021) has not put him off travelling, in fact he is planning to travel more this year. Pre-pandemic, his aim was to have a three-to-four-day weekend every three to four months to take care of his mental wellbeing. He believes it is important to have something to look forward to and to be excited about, booking something three months ahead gives him that. The pandemic has had the effect of making him and his friends want to travel more. There is a strong demand for leisure travel. His best friend is planning to travel, as are two of his close white friends, his sister is going travelling for two weeks in July, his cousin is getting married by the end of the year in Abu Dhabi so he will go to the wedding. There was no reason for him to go

travelling before, but he really wants to go travelling now as he enjoys going to other countries and exploring different countries. The Covid pandemic has made him want to go traveling even more. He believes that this is the same for other people.

Has always preferred Heathrow. There was one other airport within London from which he flew, however, he will not name but he mentions that he disliked it intensely. He states that, for him, it is common sense to fly from Heathrow as it is on his doorstep (twenty minutes away). He acknowledges that he could get a cheaper ticket from another airport, for example, Luton. Moreover, by the time he adds on travel time and the additional money to get there, especially to get an early flight as he would either need to book an overnight hotel stay or 'get up at some ungodly hour' to take a taxi to get there on time, it is not worth it. He would rather go direct from Heathrow and pay extra for the ticket as it is more convenient. He acknowledges that this can cause issues with his friends because they like flying budget airlines. However, he will not fly from another airport because the time spent travelling and the money spent commuting to it results in time wasted which could be spent enjoying holiday time.

Asad comments on changes that he has seen at Heathrow. One of the biggest impacts that he has seen due to the pandemic, has been the loss of various people through the severance scheme and redundancies. He knows a lot of people that he knows who have left the business. Visible changes for passengers have been Covid safety measures, for example, the introduction of enhanced cleaning such as sanitising toilets, seats, and areas, which is continuing. This is quite assuring for passengers. Heathrow was recently awarded the highest rating from Sky Trax for their standards of cleanliness and covid cleaning regime. It is comforting to know these are in place. Behind the scenes, the biggest change has been not seeing as many planes, not just from his window but when he comes to the airport. It is eerily quiet. He reminisces that when he came in July or August 2020 it was noticeably quiet and that it was very unnerving to see the airport like that because he has always seen the airport really busy. For example, Christmas 2019, the airport was packed with holidaymakers going away for the Christmas holidays. Asad explains that it was very odd to see the airport so quiet and desolate. Personally, he found it weird as the airport has lost a lot of staff, so they (remaining employees) had to pick up the workload. Now 'things are ramping up' but between now and the initial lockdown when Heathrow lost a lot of staff, there was a lot of work but not enough people to pick up work. This was quite hard on people's wellbeing because working from home, office space and working space 'kind of mingled' and office hours were long. It was harder to segregate working life and personal life. Whereas now he comes to the office, does his work, goes home, and 'that's it done,' he does not have to consider work until tomorrow morning unless he gets a call about something which has happened which requires him. Asad acknowledges that getting used to that new way of working (remote working from home during lockdown) was quite difficult for a lot of people.

Asad was asked about passenger levels at Heathrow. He notes that passenger levels are not at the levels that they were at pre-pandemic but that they are going up. It is becoming busier and busier, airlines are scheduling more flights, and leisure travelers are increasing. The biggest impact has been on business travelers as businesses have realised that meetings can be done online on Teams or Zoom. Asad thinks that business travel will take longer to increase, noting that some meetings will have to take place face-to-face rather than online. For example, it may be a meeting in Germany which takes two hours to get to, but it is worth doing it because the business benefits of doing that meeting face-to-face outweigh the benefits of doing it virtually. He reiterates that there are business passengers but that he thinks business travel will take longer to recover. However, leisure travel spikes upwards every time restrictions are eased. In the past when red, amber, green travel has been eased there have been big spikes in bookings. Even now, the airport is expecting an increase over Easter, with the possibility of 200,000 leisure passengers per day for the first time since the pandemic. The airport is expecting at least over 100,000 passengers per day during the Easter peak. Asad remarks that this is very odd for them (the airport) as one year ago, there were only four thousand passengers a day 'which is peanuts.' Passenger levels are increasing slowly. The airport expects these to have reached half of pre-pandemic levels this year and should hopefully have reached pre-pandemic levels by next year.

Passenger levels were exceptionally low during the initial pandemic. They were so low, four to eight thousand passengers each day, it was concerning as the airport was used to 200,000 per day. Currently, passenger levels are in the tens of thousands daily on a regular basis. These should increase over the Easter peak which might reach one fifty. The airport is confident the levels will increase steadily.

Asad's most significant memory of Heathrow is quite hard to choose. Workwise he really enjoys working there. He has travelled through Heathrow as a passenger a lot, so he thinks it is hard to choose just one. However, he chooses his first time at Heathrow, noting had it not been an enjoyable experience it would have been difficult for him to come back to work at the airport. He notes that this is an important memory for him. He also mentions that his overall experience of travelling through Heathrow on several occasions and meeting people at Heathrow, for example picking up family and friends from the airport/being met himself, is significant. It is more a collection of memories rather than a singular one which is significant to him.

Asad would like Heathrow to return to pre-pandemic levels and the pre-pandemic experience of travelling through Heathrow for passengers. He comments that Covid has affected each person differently and uniquely, for example, some people have lost loved



ones, some people have not seen family for an exceptionally long time. He thinks the journey to recovery will be slow but that it is important to be patient to allow each person the time that they need to get to where they need to be to allow for that next stage of growth. He does not think that it can just go back to how it used to run and function pre-pandemic immediately. He acknowledges that he does not know what the future holds for him, nor does he know what it holds for Heathrow, but he hopes it goes well. Pre-Covid the airport had rapid expansion plans so he hopes that in time those will be able to go ahead and go well for the airport. He acknowledges that his comments may appear biased as he is an airport employee. Asad believes that the benefits of Heathrow's expansion far outweigh the risks in terms of focus on sustainability, carbon neutrality, environmental action, and other areas. He is aware that the airport's future expansion plans are not detrimental to the environment but are helping the environment.

Asad was asked about his experience of coming to the UK as a child. He would have been in Year 4/Year 5 at that time. He recalls that he did not know that he was coming to the UK until one of his aunts asked him what he thought about coming here. He mentions that his dad was not happy about this as he had not told Asad yet. Asad was excited but nervous. He spent the summer term at his new school in Year 5 then returned for Year 6 before continuing to grammar school. Year 5 was interesting because he had a strong accent and as a result, he was heavily bullied in his first two weeks. As a child he struggled with this. He notes that the excitement of moving to a new country was overshadowed by this. That experience affected him, he really hated going to school, and was worried about how he was going to be 'picked on.' He spent the summer asking his mother to go home to India. It affected his experience through Year 6, after which he went to grammar school. Asad recalls that grammar school was different as he was considered not to be a threat and he was not bullied at all. He has not kept in touch with anyone from primary school due to the negative experience there, but he has one or two people that he keeps in touch with from grammar school. Asad comments that it was a bittersweet period as the excitement of moving to the UK was impacted by his first few weeks at primary school.

Asad recalls that although Slough has a strong South Asian influence, he does not believe that this influenced his dad's decision to bring the family there. Asad states that it was due to his dad's decision was based on being close to his office (company head office was in Slough), good transport links such as its proximity to the airport, and central London in terms of train travel. When his dad looked for a property to rent initially, he also took into consideration primary and secondary school provision. Education was important as both his parents are graduates. Asad also comments that there is an expectation that South Asian children will be high achievers. He believes that his dad was not looking for a South Asian community but for an area which was a

convenient area, had decent properties, good locality, good education provision, and good transportation. It is coincidental that there has been an explosion in the South Asian Diaspora over the years in the area but that is due to all the factors which Asad has mentioned above. It is very well placed. When he first moved there, Asad was not concerned about the lack of South Asian people. He was excited about being close to the airport and London and being in a new country.

Asad was given the opportunity to ask any questions that he may have before the interview ended. He asked about the recording being used as part of the National Portrait Gallery. Anne-Marie explained that the recordings are part of the National Portrait Gallery Project 'Inspiring People' which is being run while the gallery is closed for major refurbishment. It involves reaching out to different parts of the UK to ensure that their collections are accessible and to engage lots of different communities in the National Portrait Gallery Collection. The content for that exhibition is still being formulated but it has not been designed yet. One key feature will be a documentary featuring young people who have worked on the project from local schools in the Ealing and Southall area. There may be material from some of these recordings which may be relevant to the material which they produce. So sound bites from the interviews may be used to complement that material. It has not been formulated so depending on the material that we have collected, it may or may not be used for the exhibition.

Anne-Marie offered to send Asad some links about the project to Asad if he was interested. Asad was interested and is happy to take part. Anne-Marie confirmed that once the exhibition and documentary are ready, the information about it would be sent to him and to Heathrow so that he could come to see it.

The interview ended at 14:05.