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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 3

Date: Wednesday 2 March 2022

Time: 12.13

Place: Online

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

Interviewees: Pritpal Kaur and Minreet Kaur (mother and daughter)

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Pritpal was born in the village of Chabwaal, province of Hurshpaur in the Punjab, India, where she lived. The family had a second home in Delhi where her grandparents. The family split their time between their two homes. Her uncle moved to the United Kingdom (UK) in the nineteen fifties, her father came in 1961, and she came in 1963 when she was 13 years old with the rest of the family. The family came by ship, which took fourteen days, disembarking at Dover, travelled by rail to Euston, then to Southall, where the family lived. She is 71 years old now. She enjoyed the journey, it was fun. She has been here since then, studied, got married, had children, and worked. She has worked at the airport since having her children.

Pritpal explained that her uncle had the only grocer's shop in Southall, supplying goods – spices, pickle from India. He was generous to people who came from India, especially those without jobs, allowing them to pay for goods later once they had settled and found employment. He also started the first grocery delivery service in 1963. The shop is still there but under different ownership. He is still remembered today for his kindness. Pritpal that everyone should live life by kindness and that this will be returned to you.

Minreet was born in 1980 in Hillingdon and has been in the house ever since. She started working at the airport when she was sixteen, wrapping gifts for Christmas at Caviar House. She also worked at World Duty Free and Boots. She did this while at school, college, and university, finishing when she completed university. After university, Minreet had a full-time job in marketing, then became a journalist, and is now a swimming instructor. She mentions that working at the airport was an ideal job while she was at college and university because it was so flexible, but she has not worked there since then.

Minreet heard about the project from one of her friend's daughters at the gym. She wanted to take part because she used to work at the airport as did lots of her friends. It used to be a place to socialise, where she made lots of friends, flexible, and lots of fun. It has changed a lot since then. For example, there used to be MacDonalds and Burger King, which was taken out to become healthier. Now there is Prêt, Costa Coffee, and Starbucks which they did not have then. It was a different time back then. She thought it would be interesting to remember her childhood, growing up, and what it was like to have a part-time job at the airport.

Pritpal got married in 1974, had her son, bought this house where they are now living a couple of years later, which is 5 minutes from the airport. It is convenient for schools, shops, work, and transportation. Her first job at the airport was in one of the shops, for five to six years, leaving in 1980 when she had her daughter. She returned to work part-

time somewhere else when Minreet was small and then when she was 10/11 went back to work full-time. Her husband worked for British Airport Authority (BAA), so they worked opposite shifts. She has been working at the airport ever since and has worked here for 45/46 years. She currently works for Harrods where she has been for seventeen years but has worked for the duty-free shops, Caviar House. When Terminal 2 (T2) was refurbished, the Queen came, Pritpal was working for Caviar House at the time, and remembers being told that if the Queen wanted a tin of caviar just to pack it up and give it to her for free. She recalls seeing the Queen when she came through. There was a tunnel from Terminal 1 (T1) to T2 for taxis which could also be used by pedestrians. It takes approximately fifteen minutes from Pritpal's house, so she used to walk to and from work to save money. She remembers when there was only Terminal 3 (T3). When she worked at Terminal 4 (T4) she also walked to and from work which took around fifteen minutes. Times were hard so they worked hard to pay the mortgage and bills, but they still enjoyed life. Pritpal mentions that things were quite different. It was much easier to get a job, and that you could get one straight away. Nowadays it is more challenging and takes longer.

When Pritpal started working at the airport, it was not as busy, it was quieter. People did not travel much then more people travel now. There are many more shops, boutiques, and restaurants. The airport is also much bigger as Terminal 5 (T5) has been built. Pritpal mentions that T3, T4 and T5 are like shopping centres now. She mentions MacDonalds, Burger King, unhealthy food shut down, and that the restaurants are 'more posh' now – Leon, Prêt, so many nice ones, nice pubs as well. It has become more of a luxury now.

Minreet remembers lots of different shops; Tie Rack, MacDonalds, Burger King, the Body Shop, tourist shops like Glorious Britain but a lot of them have closed now, so it is quite different now. Now there are more coffee places and restaurants, there are more eating places, which has changed the atmosphere. She mentions that she enjoyed browsing in the shops during her lunch break as there were a lot of high street shops back then, so it was enjoyable. There were staff rooms where staff could go and eat lunch, however, many stores have removed these so staff now have to go out into the lounge for their breaks. There is not as much time to browse during breaks anymore as it takes longer to do things during your break, for example, going out for fresh air as it takes longer to get in and out of the airport. Minreet mentions that the airport was different then as there were lots of different people working there for example immigrants from India. It was a very vibrant, fun environment, she never felt it was hard work.

Pritpal recalls meeting several famous people; J.R. from Dallas, James Bond, Simon Cowell. She particularly remembers meeting J.R. who gave her a one-dollar bill with his

face on it to keep. She remembers he was just the same as he was on T.V. (television). Pritpal notes that she loves the airport life, she is never bored with it, she has met 'so many lovely people, different nationalities as well.' The airport has been part of her life for 45 years.

When they first came here it was not that bad but in the last ten to fifteen years that has changed, there are a lot of drugs now. There used to be a lot of English people with beautiful gardens. Lots of people have passed away so their houses have been sold and they are not being maintained in the way that they used to be. Recently, in the last five years, a lot of people have moved out and have rented their houses. The people who have rented them may be druggies and do not keep the houses clean. It has become dirty round the airport. Not the kind of place they want to be so they would like to move out too.

Minreet recalls that the airport used to be more accessible. There is more traffic nowadays and bus lanes which cause traffic issues, so the area has become more polluted. It is very congested now, especially with the M4 which is closed at the weekend exacerbating traffic congestion and pollution. She mentions that they would go for walks and cycling in the past, but they no longer want to do this as they can smell the pollution as they can smell the planes taking off. It is also quite noisy. During lockdown it was much quieter, and the quality of air was better, but now it is quite polluted and noisy again. It is quite congested and busy so she would also like to move. Minreet mentions that their current location is convenient for the airport as they can drop one another off and get the bus. There used to be a free bus service to Heathrow from Harlington Corner but that has been removed since lockdown. It has become very crowded.

Pritpal feels that going back thirty years, fewer people used to fly compared to nowadays. She feels too many people are flying now, there are more flights. People have become wealthier and are 'flying out, going here there and everywhere.' She mentions that it has become busier, 'it is too much, it is such a small area around here, such a big airport ...lots of pollution as well and the noise as well ... the noise from the take-off is so bad.'

When asked about the effects on health, Pritpal says that it does affect health. She notes that they used to go for walks in the local area but not anymore. They go to a health club outside the area and do their exercise there as it is cleaner, not as polluted.

Minreet notes that they can get a cough or cold more easily and feel that you breathe in the pollution.

Pritpal concurs. She mentions that people spit in the street, there is animal excrement in the streets. Minreet mentions littering. Pritpal continues. She notes people have become very dirty and do not treat a place like their own. She says it is quite sad to see all that. She feels sorry for the cleaners who come round to clean it as they must work double hard, picking everything up. There is a lot of litter at the side of the road on the approaches to the airport where people have thrown items, for example, beer cans, out of their cars. Pritpal thinks that there should be more cameras and fines to discourage this.

Minreet noted that during the lockdown, that littering stopped as people could not come to the area. It was quieter and peaceful. They could go out for walks as it felt safer and did not have to worry about seeing litter and seeing depressing things like mattresses dumped on side roads where they live. Minreet mentions that they live opposite Starbucks and KFC, people dump rubbish from it on their road even though there is a litter bin at the bus stop. This stopped during lockdown as they were closed. I improved and was quiet, so it was nice to go for a walk without planes taking off and without the noise. Pritpal agrees and comments that it has gone back to normal. However, Minreet believes that noise and traffic have become worse since lockdown ended. Pritpal concurs and mentions that people are driving faster and do not think about the safety of other people.

Pritpal comments that now restrictions have lifted that the levels of flights are still affected but that it is getting back to normal slowly, but it is still less than before. She says it is getting busier and people are starting to fly more. Minreet interrupts, noting that now that there are no restrictions, for example, no requirement for a PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test for those who have been double jabbed.

Before the pandemic they have used Heathrow when travelling to Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Morocco, America, and India. Minreet enjoyed Heathrow as a consumer, she thinks that it is a 'really lovely airport, one of the best.' She enjoys travelling through and browsing in the shops, she thinks the experience is quite good. The only thing is that passengers are expected to be there so many hours beforehand which is 'a bit of a drag.'

Pritpal also comments on her passenger experience, noting that it is similar to that of her daughter, Minreet. She notes that the airport is clean and that getting to the airport is convenient for them because of their location. However, she again notes that the local area around the airport has become rough and horrible. She mentions that jobs take a long time to be completed now. For example, Pritpal recounts that the shortcut she used to access the airport has been closed for a long time. This has affected those who want

to cycle to work or commute via motorbike as they must leave their bike elsewhere and take a bus. This is inconvenient for these people. People also must pay for the bus now.

None of the family have travelled since the pandemic. Pritpal mentions that they will wait another year or so before travelling internationally again. They are in no rush to go anywhere but they may go somewhere in the UK. Minreet agrees. Minreet is looking forward to using Heathrow again. She thinks it will get better and will probably be back to normal by the time they use it again. Pritpal agrees. She also mentions that people who have not seen their loved ones for a long time and people who work abroad are using the airport more but that there are not as many people using it for holidays. However, she believes that it will take some time for this to happen.

Pritpal thinks that Heathrow is very nice compared to other airports that she has used. There is clear signage, plenty of staff to help, and it is quite straightforward. Minreet notes that it is easy to navigate. Pritpal also comments that it is well-organised and the shops are nice. She also notes that people will find things more expensive now due to VAT. People may think twice about shopping at the airport as it is not as cheap anymore.

Pritpal feels safe at the airport. People are happy because they are going on holiday, it is a lovely atmosphere. She loves the airport and would not work anywhere else.

Minreet also loves the atmosphere at the airport, it is quite fun, vibrant. It is quite bright and busy because there are lots of people going on holiday, lots of restaurants, and places to shop. It is nice to travel through and switch off from the outside world. She notes that the biggest change has been the five-pound fee for dropping off and picking up people at the airport. It used to be convenient before this was introduced but it has caused more traffic and chaos. She comments that it is about money now so she wonders what other changes may be introduced. Pritpal agrees with this but also mentions that T2 has been refurbished and T5 is huge. Both these terminals are modern and bright. Additional refurbishment has made other areas in the airport more spacious and lighter.

Pritpal's most significant memory of Heathrow is of Concorde. She remembers it was noisy. It was something different. Minreet's most significant memory is of being able to walk through the tunnel as it was easy. That has stopped so now she needs to think about getting there, which bus to take. She used to like just going to the airport to walk around and meet friends. She would love to do that again, but it is not possible now as it

is about those who are travelling out. Pritpal comments that the airport bus is quite expensive when Minreet would only be travelling for two stops. She mentions that she enjoyed walking through the tunnel and that she would like the airport to re-open the tunnel.

Pritpal would like free transportation for staff to be re-implemented and the side tunnels to be completed. She also mentions that the airport should make it easier for staff who cycle to work to be able to do so.

Minreet indicated that the user experience should be made simpler so that people do not need to be at the airport three hours prior to travelling. It should be more accessible, simpler and less chaos when going through security. She also talks about employment, commenting that the airport is a good place to find work as it offers many potential job opportunities. Minreet states that the airport should find a way to make it easier to reach out to people and help people get back into work as there are fewer opportunities in other employment areas locally. This is more important post-Covid when people are finding it difficult to find employment in general.

Pritpal loves the airport. She will work there until she cannot work anymore. She has been working for one company for seventeen years, so she knows everyone, and it has become like a family. She mentions that a lot of people have been there for years. She is not the only one who has been there for forty years. She likes seeing different faces, not like being in an office where it is the same faces every day.

Pritpal chose to work at Heathrow due to its convenient location, it was a good travelling distance, five minutes away. The salary was good and there is job security as once you got a job at the airport, you were there for life. She mentions that changing jobs was easy and that it was easier to get jobs in those days. Pritpal comments that it is harder to get work now. She also mentions that her husband worked at the airport for twenty-seven years.

Minreet decided to work there because she lived near Heathrow and needed a part-time job. It was easily accessible as she could either walk there or get the free bus to the airport. She did not want to spend money on travel and wanted to work somewhere close to home. The airport was within walking distance but if she took the bus, it was only two stops and was free. She also mentions that a lot of her friends were working there, and it was a lot of fun. There were a lot of brands that she bought from like Boots where she could work. She ended up working for Boots. Minreet loved her job at Boots.

Pritpal reminds Minreet of her first job at the airport which was a Christmas job wrapping gifts at Caviar House. Pritpal comments about how easy it was to help people find work at the airport as she would be asked to recommend family members and friends by her employers and vice versa. She also mentions that Minreet loved her job at the airport.

The family share the experience of working at the airport as mother, father, and daughter all worked there. Their experience is inter-generational. Minreet comments that they all have different memories. Her dad's memories are the oldest as he was working on the outskirts in passenger services both indoors and outdoors. He met lots of different people. Minreet says it was different because she was studying. Pritpal mentions that she has never had any sad moments at the airport, she has always been happy. She says that 'You got to work, and you see people, you're happy, then you come back home. It's nice. There's no stress there in a way.' She comments that not having stress helps you live longer. Minreet agrees.

Pritpal talks about when she was at school. She had wanted to study and take a typing course when she left school so that she could get office work. She had a part-time job as a shop at British Home Stores (BHS) while she was at school. When she left school, BHS offered her a full-time position which she took. She continued working there for five years until she met her husband and got married. When she got married, she moved to where they are now close to the airport. She has always been a shop assistant and has never got to work in an office. Pritpal comments that she enjoys it and that she never gets bored of people. She mentions that people remember her. She once had a customer who wanted a specific item, but it was not in stock. Pritpal found the item and kept it for her. As she was not working the day that the customer was flying, she left the item for the customer with a colleague. The customer left her a thank you gift. Pritpal comments that it was nice and that it is lovely that people remember her.

Pritpal recalls that she and her husband would do shift work, working opposite shifts. She would be in the car, her husband would be finishing work, he would get in the car, and she would go to work. She comments that they would hardly see one another, saying 'It was nice.' Minreet jokes that it was nice not to see one another. Pritpal explains that it was busy and feels life has become very boring. She mentions that she would be taking care of the family and working so life was very busy. There was no choice as they had to pay the mortgage and bills. It was hard but they got through it. She jokes that now she and her husband see too much of each other which is the reason she still works.

Minreet continues, her dad worked double shifts, so it made family time more special when they could all get together. She recalls that her parents worked hard and that they did not see much of each other. She concentrated on her studies, 'it was hard, but you get by because there is not a lot of choice.'

Pritpal recalls that they did not want to leave their children with other people. They were lucky that they were able to work opposite shifts. It was hard. Pritpal thinks people are struggling now because they leave their children with childcare or their parents. She asks, 'How much can you save when you have to pay a childminder?' She remarks that there was less population, and it was easier to find work. She comments on the challenges of finding work, citing her daughter's experience of trying to find work with the BBC. She acknowledges that even twenty years ago, they (prospective employers) would ask for experience and Minreet received many rejections. Pritpal comments that she believes it is even harder now and that Minreet has had to change careers to get a job by becoming a swimming teacher. She comments that people will always need to learn to swim so that this is good. She feels sorry for people nowadays as a lot of people are unemployed.

Pritpal recalls that she was able to help Minreet get her first job gift wrapping. She also helped her sister-in-law get a job at Harrods when she was working there. She cannot do this anymore. Pritpal mentions that there were staff incentives for employees to recommend workers. It was easy to help someone get work; those days are gone now. Minreet would consider going back to the airport for the right opportunity, for example, if Heathrow opened an outdoor swimming pool as she is a qualified swimming teacher. There follows a brief discussion about this.

Pritpal reiterates that the current airport operator takes too long to get things done. This was even before Covid and had been going on for a long time. She remembers that when BAA operated the airport those jobs were completed. Now there is outstanding work everywhere and nothing gets finished.

Jane Rae asks Pritpal and Minreet for their most significant memory of Heathrow before concluding the interview.

Pritpal's most significant memory is the Queen's visit, the famous people she met, and the opening of T5 which was another occasion when she saw the Queen.

Minreet's most significant memory is when the Heathrow Express was introduced. She recalls that the family got to travel on it for free before anyone else when it was new. Pritpal does not remember this. Minreet does not remember how old she was then. Anne-Marie mentioned it would have been around 1998. Manreet states that she would have been eighteen then and that it was fun. She also remembers the little cars which are used at the airport.

Jane Rae and Anne-Marie thank Pritpal and Minreet for participating. The interview ends at 13.14.