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WEST LONDON
The **Career** University

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 7

Date: 30th March 2022

Time: 11.30

Place: Online

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

Interviewee: Swaranjit Johal

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My daughter liked the project and my daughter said I liked talking about my experiences so I should take part. My daughter asked if there was anything I remember about coming to Heathrow. I arrived here in 1964. I come from India, Punjab, Chatigar. My husband was a teacher. He then moved to England.

I grew up in Fiji with my mum, dad and grandfather after I was 2 years, I was born in India, I grew up and after Pakistan/India divide, I went back 1947, I teach ladies stitching, my husband was the principal of a school. I liked my life I did not want to come to England. My family, brothers and sisters were in England. My father said I should go to England with my children.

My husband, brother, and sister were here. After we arrived my daughter cried, and my son was sick - he liked India. I wanted my mum and dad. We had a nice house in India, but Indian wages were low, UK wages were high and there were clean, nice facilities. Everyone said I should come here.

I grew up in Fiji different to India, all countries different, love it here money and nice house in India with servant, but wages low. Siblings, all happy in UK because wages higher. She knew what England would be like. Leaving home is quite difficult. It was March and April with snow, so very cold, no home delivery, no garlic, no Indian shop, nothing in Southall only English shop, no supermarkets, no green chilies. Only shepherds bush and Birmingham. Only that all the family were together, now I am happy, I have a nice house, everything is clean, now I like England.

It was hard when I first arrived. No car, no big house, no servants, everyone shares the house, children needed looking after, job paid £3 wages. My first job at Heathrow was in the Queens Building. I washed and cut potatoes, making chips by hand. Not allowed to wear trousers, had to wear stockings, skirt, and dress, top and gown. I peeled and cut potatoes and made chips, mashed potato – Friday and Tuesday fish and chips. Lots of people smoked, I did not like the smell. First arrive at 7 in the morning, leave in a van which will pick me up from home at 6 o'clock. 10-minute tea break, lunch break ½ hour, finish job at 5, go home in van, no convenient bus available to Heathrow, only 1 bus in the morning and 1 bus in the evening. 5 days of work gave me £2.50. A man doing the same job got £4.50 and I get £3. No equal wages. Same job, but men got paid more, ladies less. I could go shopping with 25p-50p and take home 2 bags of shopping in both hands. £1 weekly rent. After I start British Airways job, I got a £5 note. Same work – kitchen cleaning, cutting potatoes. My husband worked in a factory getting £5 but ladies doing the same job got £3.50. Same in India, but now things are more equal. Slowly everything grew. I first worked in Heathrow 1 and Queens's building.

16.30

My husband came to collect me from Airport when I arrived. Heathrow had nothing at the Airport. Same as Delhi Airport, nothing there. We had to stop at various places including Frankfurt. (She thought she landed in the jungle). It was a very long journey. Not everyone had a car, some English and old people had 1 car. My brother's friend had

a car, 6/7 people drive this car. A few people used a van to get to factory/airport doing any jobs. No bus service. 5p, 2p, 1p. Everything was a penny or ha'penny. One penny bus fare to hospital. Same in India – small money. I have lived in Langley since 1974. I grew all sorts of things, mustard seeds etc. More terminals have been developed since. Now planes are nice. The first time coming here, it took 3 days to get here from Delhi.

17.50

1st day I start my first day in the Queens building. 3rd day since arriving from India. Washing by hand. I had my children in India, a boy and a girl. I worked in the staff restaurant. All staff do the same jobs – one day cleaning, 1 day preparing food, only frozen peas and cabbage, no foreign food. Restaurant and washing up. I worked for BAA (British Airports Authority), now run by a different company.

At British Airways I washed up in the aircraft, put crockery in machine for cleaning, crockery, glasses, cutlery – now is disposable. My neighbour told me about a job starting the next day, I tried for job (told existing job I had guests coming so could not work). After I went to British Airways, fill in form and check passport, after medical and test/interview, after 2 weeks they gave me a job washing up, started later in 1964. Cleaning the aircraft, then helping the cook in the kitchen. Then I got a job in a staff canteen. Making sandwiches, tea coffee etc. After 10 months doing the job, he cut a lot of jobs, and new people started. Then I worked at Ealing and Hillingdon Hospital. I had cleaning work and school dinner lady job. After I did this job, I got a job at Air Canada for 3 months - change blankets, pillows, cleaning, hoovering etc. Making food, packing, aircraft cleaning, pick up trolley service, lots of jobs. After the British Airways job, I worked in Hillingdon Hospital (she left British Airways 5 times). I also worked at Air India; the work was seasonal. I also worked at Hounslow medical factory 5 days a week, very happy, this was a 9am start and 4pm finish. My husband drove the van and did night jobs. When the job ended, I got a lumpsum of money. My daughter went to Oxford College.

29.50

1974 I started a permanent job with British Airways. I worked in the canteen, cooking, cleaning everything. Very happy, aircraft tickets were free, my daughter used these to travel to studies in Canada. After my children married, I finished my job, I took early retirement, I took a lump sum. My daughter went to Canada for studies. I worked at terminal 2. They offered me £10,000 or shares. This was in 1988. I did not work anywhere after this, I bought house and rented out, I then rented houses, buying and selling property here and in India. Terminal 5 is nice and clean. Sometimes in summer one of my friends invites me to go out to terminal 5 to have a cup of tea. I do not really like terminal 4, it's very different. Terminal 5 is the best terminal.

33.50

I have travelled lots, I've been to lots of countries, Canada, America etc. British airways was a good job, I was very happy. I enjoy terminal 5. Heathrow airport is the best, terminal 5 is the best, nice, great service, nice and clean. I can see planes from the kitchen window on the other side. The bus goes to terminal 5, nearby. I love this house. I am happy here. Nice buildings, lots of money spent, money on roads etc.

Some people live 5 minutes up the road and hear noise. On my side there is no runway, on the other side there is a runway and a lot of noise. This house I live along my husband 10 year died. Every plane coming, I am happy and proud to live in London and near Heathrow.

When Heathrow flights were suspended in Covid it was quiet, it was lonely, everybody felt enclosed, everywhere very peaceful. Now people like going on holiday. During covid I would see 1 plane after 2/3 hours, so it was quiet. Now flights back to flying a lot. Heathrow lost money. No buses, buses suspended. The airlines lost money.

There was lots of community working at Heathrow, India, China, Gujarati. Now everyone wants to work in office jobs at Heathrow. There are lots of companies at Heathrow. A lot of friends have died, I am now 87, I am lucky. I missed my friends lost during the coronavirus. My children looked after me. Now I am a heart patient. I am feeling ok. I am not upset; I am happy thank God. my daughter used airline standby benefit to go to Canada and comeback every 6 months. I went to all countries with husband using the British Airways benefit.

42.46

I travelled on Concorde, day off, supervisor said it was travelling to Glasgow. I went in the morning and came back in the evening. I went to Paris, there were lots of empty seats. I drank soft drinks and had food. Not a single penny paid. My husband and I went on a Concorde flight for £5 each. Sitting in 1st class seats, drinking, feeling quite different to standard class. The Concorde was very noisy when it started going up and coming down. I travelled on Concorde 20 times. Supervisor would change my day off. Everyone looks after each other like brothers and sisters. Some ladies say they do not want to fly with men, but I do not mind. Sometimes standby seat there were problems from Delhi. Sometimes I get club seats, first class. One time me and my husband had a private bathroom going to Canada. The first time I went to Italy on holiday I lost the passports, a lady took my bag. All our cash, passports etc. All stolen. Someone sprayed me and took my handbag. I had to go to the police station. *(she was taking care of all the passports, and they all got stolen. Dad was worried as he thought they might think they were refugees. When they got to the police station there was a queue because they were not the only victims).* British Airways helped and sent the tickets again, we did not have to pay for replacement tickets. My husband was working in civil service, my daughter had to go on to university.

50.55

My most significant memory at Heathrow is the first time I landed at Heathrow – it was in the middle of nowhere (*she felt as though she was in the jungle*), one building, one house in the village. No car, no deliveries. Little plane – quite different now. Now it is different, very posh England, Heathrow airport very posh.

I started my first job in the UK 3 days after arriving in England. I had never worn a skirt and stockings before (*it was a big deal to wear stockings*). I was not allowed to wear pajamas, I had a top and skirt, stockings, white cap and white overalls. The first days were difficult, washing by hand 2/3 days, I mixed all right with English ladies and boys, people of all nationalities. One Indian man spoke to me and said you will be used to it after one week. Some ladies were very shy, people were talking English, my English bad, but they said do not worry. I was told to slowly wash, not fast. No one was bad or unkind. People spoke nicely, some people from my own country were jealous, other people nice and friendly. I would make tea, everyone liked me, everyone is different. Everybody helped me.

In India I was a housewife, I taught women embroidery, sewing and knitting. At first, I found everything difficult here, I missed the ladies. I had a helper who cooked, cleaned, and looked after the children, here nobody helped. Sometimes I cried, 2-3 years it was very hard, I wanted to go back.

The first time I lived here with my brothers and sisters, after 3 months we bought a house. It felt difficult, sometimes we all cried. My husband worked night work. Sometimes I felt like a servant here. After 5-10 years I was happy. My husband was understanding, my husband cooked and looked after me, he had a hard job. Family is happiness.

English people are a lot better than Canadian and Americans who fight too much. This is my favourite country; it is my country now. My daughter married an English man. She has a nice mother and father-in-law, she is happy. I like everything, it is very peaceful.

Interview finished 01.05.40