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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 4

Date: Monday 7th March 2022

Time: 15.30

Place: Online

Interviewers: Anne-Marie Purcell UWL (University of West London) Archives

Interviewees: Parbhat Smith (Pat Smith)

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I was born in the Punjab in 1959 and I came to the UK (United Kingdom) at age 5 in 1965. I can remember my arriving at Heathrow for the first time. I can remember getting off the steps of the aeroplane and seeing my father straight away standing on top of the red brick wall. I had not seen father for a year or two. I am 63 this month, I have lived around Heathrow all my life. I have lived in Southall and in Cranford, under the flightpath. I lived in Kew Gardens where there are lots of aeroplanes, now I live in Sunningdale also near Heathrow. Heathrow has been a part of my life ever since I landed in the country. I have been married for 35 years to an Englishman hence my name is Smith. My father is no longer alive, and mother now lives in Langley near Colnbrook, which has always been part of Heathrow culture and expansion. My mother worked for British Airways (BA) cleaning aircraft and catering.

I started a business when I was 30 making Indian snacks, Heston industrial unit, the unit I hired was an old hangar, outside the unit was some steps that apparently Neville Chamberlain had used for his famous speech, there was no sign, not sure if it is still now there. I like that bit of history and hope it is still there. Surprised that nobody has ever investigated this and put a plaque or historical sign there.

Mother and father had two children (me and my brother). My father was a teacher in India, quite happy. My mother persuaded my father to go to UK, he was given a voucher, asked to come over and he thought he would make money and then go back. He was a writer and poet; his background was academic. When he came over, he did not teach, he did manual work, his brothers supported him (my uncles). My mum's older brother had a house in Southall, they all shared a house, and each family would have one room, everyone was building up to buy a property and bring their wives over. Later my father wanted to go back but there were complications – his family said because he had gone to the UK, he could no longer inherit anything back home even though he was the oldest son, they threatened him, he had nowhere to go back to, this affected him a lot. Anyone who came over was expected to send money home which he did but at the same time he could not take any pieces of anything even though he was entitled. Father had a turban (Sikh) in India and when he came to the UK the first thing, he and other Indian men did was remove turban and cut hair short because it made it easier for them to get work. I spotted my father that day I arrived at Heathrow even though I had not seen him for several years and still recognised him without his turban. My father was my life, I used to walk to school with him. I still recognised him so the aircraft must have been quite close to the brick wall. Many Indians travelled to the UK because they were asked to come. Domestic English people did not want to work nightshifts, immigrants did. There was plenty of work and that is the work that they could get.

My father was involved in setting up poetry sessions, friends would come round, any literary figure from the Punjab would be hosted, visitors and writers from India, there was a big community, they organised poetry reading events. My father carried on writing until he died, he wrote in Punjabi several books. He must have experienced prejudice – 'Us Black People' contained his experiences, sensitivities, of being coloured. He wrote another book about going back and not being able to go back - he wanted to go back but physically could not because what he left behind is no longer there. One book is on the curriculum in University in India. He got involved in

publishing magazines, Indian Punjabi – 1st Punjabi newspaper in Southall – ‘Des Pardes’. Indian people did not have anything to read so he and friends published and printed materials, they got information together on events and where to buy tickets, information about back home and here etc. He was heavily involved in the literary area.

The voucher for my father’s airfare – I may still have it. I remember he was allowed 3 pounds in his pocket. He relied on help from the relatives, her uncles, he got nothing more than the voucher.

My father worked in manual labour as he was physically very fit and strong. He worked for Eagle Airlines, then Nestle, I remember him coming home with chocolate. He drove workers to and from the Airport in a van, he worked nights. He did a librarian ship course but did not stick to it and got distracted. He also worked for social security, but it was not stimulating enough, he needed to do more academic stuff, he just wanted to read and write or work hard, he never went back to teaching.

I lived in Southall when we arrived, not that close to Heathrow, I cannot remember the aeroplanes there. Heathrow was small and did not feel close to the Airport. Cranford was next to Heathrow, you could wave to people on the aircraft. I remember when I was doing my A Levels I stood in garden talking to the lady next door she was about 90 with white hair, during 1970s heatwave, and we could almost see the people inside the planes. It was very noisy, so we did not live there for that long, we then moved to Langley. My Mum still lives there and does not want to move. Mum has seen Heathrow expand a lot and worked at the Airport for a long time. All the terminals are approved – she is already talking about terminal 7!

I lived in Kew Gardens for 10 years and did not notice any noise because I worked but the day I stayed at home and opened back door and found the aeroplanes were very noisy. We moved from there to Chiswick. Then we moved to Sunningdale where there are no planes.

I do not have memories of the actual airport when I first arrived because I was too young. I remember coming down the steps, being able to see people lining up and pointing out my father. I was taken to Southall, I remember hearing an ice cream van, my uncle bought me an ice cream, I had never had one before and I handed back the cone as didn’t realise you could eat it. The Airport was part of my life, everybody worked at Heathrow and that is where everyone went. We went back to India every year so I must have experienced Heathrow all the time from when I was young. I travelled from Heathrow all my life, we always used one terminal, terminal 3 the only terminal available at the time. I remember Heathrow being quite small, now it is a maze. Driving round Heathrow now it is a vast area. People did not all have cars then, we did not drive there. I do not have many memories of Heathrow when I was young.

As an adult I use Heathrow all the time, I travel a lot. I go to India twice a year and have lots of holidays. Heathrow has changed beyond recognition, but air travel has. Being able to book tickets, going from 1 terminal to 5 terminals, the actual experience is very different but like this around the world. The last time I travelled

was last November (2021) via Heathrow during pandemic. It felt strange as staff had no idea of what they were doing in terms of forms, who checked what. It was usually very professional and well organised. I had a BA flight, no one knew what forms to check at each stage. The Airport is now much busier and getting a shuttle to different terminal is a big deal. Lounges are very busy, it seems safer out of lounge than in the lounge due to covid. I am going to India in April and Rome in April via Heathrow so hopefully all will be ok.

I normally fly to India twice a year and go on trips in Europe, but we did not travel at all since the start of the pandemic. First travel was last November (2021). We could not book before this as India did not allow people to come in. We lost 2 tickets and travel was not worth the hassle. It was more stress booking than the benefit of travel, so we decided to stay at home. We have a house in India and assets so that is why I travel there; it is not really a holiday trip. My mother and father planned to retire to India to spend summer here (UK) and winter in India, they built a house in my name and brother's name. My father died and my mother cannot keep going over so there's things to be taken care of.

My parents worked shifts at Heathrow, I remember coming home from school and no one was at home, my brother and I would feast on biscuits and angel delight. My mum would brush my hair the night before so I could get up and go to school without needing my hair brushed so she must have gone to work before I went to school. My father slept all day because he worked at night, we were good kids, so it was not a problem.

My mother cleaned aircrafts, was involved in catering and the staff canteen, preparing food for aeroplanes, etc. She worked for BA for about 10-15 years. My auntie and uncles also worked at BA as they were known as good employer good benefits and pensions.

My mother retired long ago, she is 84. She would be a potential interview candidate as has great memories of landing etc. My mum and friends sometimes go on a trip to Heathrow for an outing using their free bus pass. They just go for coffee and to have a look around the airport and then come back. Heathrow is something new and exciting, there are shops, and it is good to be somewhere different.

Everyone wanted to work at BA as they gave staff discount. When I was a student staff discount went to all the family. I was a standby, sometimes I got first class tickets if there was a seat on the airplane available. I went to Canada to study for my MA because I knew I could get flights back and forth.

This was great benefit, my mother got flights to India every year. I travelled to India, Japan, back and forwards to Canada, went to Italy and Europe with my family, America and Los Angeles, Grenada and West Indies. I had lots of overseas student friends who I could visit using the cheap tickets. Planes were often empty in those days but now it is a lot busier. You could not quickly book tickets, you would have to go to travel agent, book it and they would post it. I would stand by the counter waiting for people to check in and then get on board if there was a space. I remember getting stuck in India at Delhi airport because I could not get a flight back.

My auntie and I slept at the airport for a week until we could get on a flight home, my parents were furious. Those benefits have now gone. All staff used to have the same benefits whether a cleaner or captain. BA have now changed this depending on length of service and ranking. It was exciting because you could go to the airport and find out where you could get to depending on space. That is why a lot of Indian people enjoyed working for BA because you can travel back and forwards to India cheaply otherwise it is expensive.

The day I landed is my most significant memory of Heathrow – being a family again, having been split up and suddenly reunited in the same place which is so important when a child. It was a long flight and my mother was breast feeding my brother, he had a blood shot eye as a hook got caught in his eye. Another memory is taking my grandfather to Heathrow airport. I must have been about 16/17 and the last thing he said was 'marry an Indian'. I did not take that seriously but that was the last piece of advice he gave me.

Also, in April 1993 I was pregnant expecting my son any day. My husband and I went to Heathrow to collect my sister-in-law who had gone on holiday to Spain. I told my husband we had to leave and go to the Hospital straight away as I thought I might give birth. So, we left the airport and drove to Hammersmith Hospital where we arrived just in time as I was already 10 1/2 cm dilated.

I've not thought of Heathrow as a concept, but it has always been a part of our life. Heathrow has evolved I have seen the changes. Heathrow is connected to me since the day I came to the UK.