

Interviewee: Ali Fazel

Interviewer: Lata Desai / Rolf Killius

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SUMMARY

Ali Fazel, born in Kenya and now living in London, recounts his idyllic childhood in Mombasa, marked by outdoor activities and a diverse school environment at the Aga Khan Academy. His family moved to Britain in 2011, driven by business interests and the desire to stay together. Ali's ancestors, including his great-grandfather Rashid Molidina, were successful coffee and tea traders in Africa. He discusses the community's resilience, the suppression of struggles, and the challenges of integrating into British society while maintaining cultural identities. Ali emphasizes the need for better understanding and integration policies for migrant communities.

Outline

Childhood Memories in Mombasa

- Ali Fazel shares his idyllic childhood in Mombasa, Kenya, highlighting Sunday evenings by the beach and playing cricket with family.
- He describes his outdoor lifestyle, spending most of his time playing outside and participating in sports at the local club.
- Ali recalls his time at the Aga Khan Academy in Mombasa, which he considers formative for his early years.
- The decision to move to Britain was influenced by family business interests and the desire to stay together as a family.

Family History and Ancestry

- Ali explains his parents' African roots, with his mother born in Kampala, Uganda, and his father in Mombasa, Kenya.
- He details the entrepreneurial stories of his great-grandfathers, one a successful coffee trader and the other the first tea exporter to Pakistan from Kenya.
- Ali discusses the community's resilience and adaptability, emphasizing their strong African identity despite their Indian heritage.
- He mentions the challenges of settling in Africa and the tendency within the community to suppress struggles.

Transition to Britain

- Ali describes the move to Britain in 2011, influenced by family business interests and the desire to live together.
- He reflects on the cultural differences between being a minority in Kenya and in Britain, noting the apprehension and cultural adjustment required in Britain.
- Ali discusses the hierarchy in colonial Kenya, where Asians were placed above the local community but beneath the whites.
- He shares his initial feelings of being a minority in Britain and the cultural differences he encountered.

School and Community Life

- Ali talks about his school, the Aga Khan Academy, and the diverse mix of students from different backgrounds.
- He describes the close-knit family environment in Mombasa, including his relationship with the house help, Zaiti, who was like a second mother to him.
- At school, Ali notes the integration among Indian students regardless of their religious backgrounds, but acknowledges the development of community differences as they grew older.
- He highlights the impact of having teachers from Britain and the US on his international perspective.

Language and Cultural Dynamics

- Ali discusses the languages spoken at home, including Gujarati, Kutchi, and Swahili, and the ease of switching between them.
- He describes the hybrid nature of his languages, incorporating Swahili words into Gujarati and English.
- Ali shares his experiences with food, noting the fusion of Indian and Swahili influences in Mombasa cuisine.
- He emphasizes the importance of food in telling the story of his cultural background and the richness of the culinary traditions.

Music and Dance

- Ali reflects on the influence of Western music and Bollywood music during long car journeys from Mombasa to Nairobi.

- He mentions his growing affinity for Indian classical and Sufi music after visiting India.
- Ali describes the cultural admiration for Britain and the impact of colonial history on his community's perception of Western music.
- He shares his experiences of music and dance, including the mix of Bollywood and Western music in his childhood.

Identity and Belonging

- Ali discusses his evolving sense of identity, moving from being East African Indian to British, East African Indian, and British.
- He reflects on the challenges of feeling like a foreigner in Kenya and India despite his deep connections to these places.
- Ali talks about the importance of language in connecting with people and cultures, and his efforts to learn Hindi.
- He shares his experiences of racism and otherness in Britain, particularly in political and workplace environments.

Community and Religious Identity

- Ali highlights the rich history of the East African Asian community and the lessons to be learned from their migration experiences.
- He discusses the importance of telling their stories and the challenges of suppressing struggles within the community.
- Ali reflects on the positive version of Islam practiced in East Africa and the loss of intercommunity bonds in Britain.
- He shares his pride in being a Coja and the intertwined nature of his religious and cultural identity.

Colonial Past and Education

- Ali discusses the lack of education on colonial history in Britain and the need for a more nuanced understanding of the past.
- He reflects on the positive and negative aspects of colonialism, noting the adoration for Britain among his family's generation.
- Ali emphasizes the importance of teaching colonial history to provide a complete picture of the past.
- He shares his intellectual journey of learning about his community's history and the impact of colonialism on their identity.

Future and Social Responsibility

- Ali expresses his optimism about Britain's future and his sense of belonging in multicultural cities like London and Birmingham.
- He discusses the importance of maintaining all parts of his identity and the challenges of balancing different cultural and religious aspects.
- Ali highlights the need for greater understanding and acceptance of diverse communities in Britain.
- He calls for a strategy to support migrant communities in integrating positively and contributing to British society.

FULL TRANSCRIPT

Ali Fazel 00:14
I'm Ali Fazel. I am born in Kenya. I moved to Britain when I was 10, my family and I, we lived in Birmingham. I now live in London. I work as a consultant in the city. And yeah, sort of Britain is home, but Kenya is home too. I'm the youngest of my family. I've got nieces and nephews, and yeah, really pleased to be here. So when I think back to my childhood in Mombasa, it was just idyllic, like honestly, just the most beautiful upbringing in the most idyllic, you know, part of Mombasa we would sort of spend, I remember Sunday evenings, always comes to mind when people ask me about my childhood, because I remember sort of slow evenings just by the beach sometimes, or we used to live like a stone's throw away from the cliffs, and so we'd go there. Sometimes it was Lighthouse where we'd sort of do rounds around. Then we'd have biryani for lunch every Sunday, and everyone would take a nap. And then we would all meet downstairs at 5pm to play cricket. And my cousins would come, and my dad would wake up from his nap and come down, and I was eagerly waiting, because I've been playing outside all all day. And then we'd play cricket up until sunset and and, yeah, it was just, I think of memories like that, or, you know, going to the beach on the weekends. My childhood was so outdoorsy, I spent almost every minute that I could play outside, you know, or going to play tennis at the sports club, where we had family friends, and, you know, we'd all meet and sit and mingle together. Didn't matter who you were or where you came from. And, yeah, I think back to school as well, which was amazing, you know, often people think that, Oh, you're from Kenya. So, you know, what was school like there? You know, almost like concerned about my my education standards, especially when I first moved to this country. But actually, it was an amazing school. It was the Aga Khan Academy in Mombasa, which was open, sort of mid 2000s and probably, you know, that was really formative for me those first few years there. So, yeah, I was lucky enough to spend the first 12 years of my life in Mombasa, and then we moved to Britain. And I think it was always the plan that we would move to the west at some point. I think, you know, I had family in Canada, but also in Britain. And I think Mum and Dad eventually decided that Britain was a place to be, because my brother and sister had both gone away for university, and it was so hard to split apart the family. I think they were really keen that we all moved together so that we could carry on living together as a family. And, you know, there was business interest in Britain as well, so it made sense to make that move together, or else, you know, I think they thought maybe they'll be empty nesters forever, as opposed to, you know, building a life together in Britain. So when I was 12, so I that was in 2011 Yeah,

Lata Desai 03:15
Just want to go back a little bit to your parents

Lata Desai 03:18
and your grandparents. Do you know how your parents ended in Africa?

Ali Fazel 03:24
Yes. So my mom and dad were both born in Africa. My mom was born in Kampala in Uganda, and my dad was born in Mombasa. My grandparents were also born in Africa, and it was their parents. So on my mom's side, it was, it was my great grandfather who moved. On my dad's side, it was my great great grandfather who moved so we had been in Africa for at least three to four generations. So on my dad's side, it was, yeah, my great great grandfather who moved on my mom's side, my great grandfather. And his story was actually really interesting, because he was the, I think he was one of the most successful coffee traders of his time when he was there. And this was obviously during colonial Britain, right? And his name was Rashid Molidina, and he was extremely enterprising. He moved from India. I think it was like 30s or so, 1930s maybe early. I don't know the exact dates. And you know how this community is hugely enterprising. Everyone wants to start their own business. No one is happy to work for anyone else. So he was keen to start his own coffee trade. So he would he was based in... he first arrived in Tanzania, but then moved to Kenya, but he would have to travel to Uganda every week for the coffee auctions. So he would go to Uganda for these coffee auctions with his translator, because he didn't speak English, but these auction houses were full of white British men. And he would have to sit at the back, behind the auction, sort of area with this translator, who would then bid for him, for the for the coffee. And he was doing this for ages, going to Uganda, back and forth, until eventually he decided that actually something's got to change. Now, at that point, the coffee auctions actually moved to Nairobi, so made life a lot easier for him, because he didn't have to travel to Uganda every week, and it was at one auction where actually he there was a coffee going and he, he outbid everyone else in the room and over inflated the price by around over 10 times the actual price of the coffee. And in that moment, the stories I've heard is, you know, everyone in the auction house was like, Who the hell is this man who has bid, you know, so much higher than anyone else. And they all looked back, and it was Rashid Molidina, who had overbid, and the auctioneer came to the back and, you know, shook his hand and brought him to the front. And it was, that was the start I guess. But it, I think it really just shows the resilience that this community had right from the offset. So that was my maternal side, and then on my paternal side, my great my grandfather, he was the first tea exporter to Pakistan from from Kenya, and today, Pakistan is the second largest importer of Kenyan tea after Britain. So, yeah, on both sides, you know the stories of enterprise, tea, coffee. You know, families who've made the best of their lives in Africa, coming from India, hugely adaptable. And so we've always been very strongly African because of that. You know, we've been in Africa for such a long time. We speak Swahili, we love the country, it has given us so much as a community and as a family that it was quite hard to leave, to be honest, in many ways of their struggles

Lata Desai 06:55
Did your parents or grandparents struggle settling in Africa?

Ali Fazel 06:57
yeah, absolutely, it was tough. I mean, I think one thing about this community, however, and I spoke about this a little bit in my dissertation as well, is there was a tendency to talk less about the struggle, almost to suppress it, because of, I don't know if it was a shame or if it

was almost, they saw it as unhelpful to talk about. But there was, it would take a lot, and almost I think it's only in the more recent years that we've started to talk a bit more about and I think it's only the generations that have followed who have got that awareness, who feel like it's important to talk about it. But, you know, the generations before were very happy, I think, to suppress it, because they didn't see it as a helpful conversation to have. You know, a lot of them were in survival mode, right when they first moved to Africa. I guess. Similarly, many who moved from Uganda to here were in survival mode. They just had to make the best of the life they'd given because they didn't. A lot of them didn't have the option to go back. So they had to, they had to just, you know, get on with it and talking about racism and stuff like that. They didn't really feel comfortable. But of course, you know, of course they did. I sadly wasn't lucky enough to meet any of my grandfathers, because they both passed away before I was born. But through my grandmothers, I often heard about, you know, how how tough it was, you know, for example, with my great grandfather and having to make a name for himself in the industry, which was British, you know, which, which meant he couldn't even sit in the auction house with the rest of, you know, the people who were, who were basically bidding for the same coffee. It does. It does hit a nerve, sort of, you know, it does really make you think that that's something we wouldn't even fathom today, as, you know, as being an issue. But they still, you know, was so successful in a time that was so everything was pitted against them. So much.

Rolf Killius 08:50
Do you know another you said before, why did your grand grandparents leave India?

Ali Fazel 08:56
Yeah, so they definitely, so I know that there was people moving for the railways. They didn't move for the railways. I think they moved just after that initial, initial influx of people left. So they weren't part of that, that group who moved. But I think it was purely enterprise. I know my great, great grandfather on my, sorry, my great, great, great grandfather on my dad's side, yeah, and I only know this now because I went to India to find out he was born in he was in Gujarat, he was in Kutch, and it was his son who decided actually to go to Kenya. He had a shop in in Kutch, and I actually saw the shop when I went recently. It was on the corner opposite the masjid and in in Kheda, in Kheda, which is not far from Bhuj, yeah, fairly close, little village shop. And he decided to actually move to East Africa, and he moved back and forth because his family was still in in in India, but it was purely for enterprise. It was purely for making a better life for themselves. I think, I think at the time, there was quite a few people going anyway, and there was good things coming out from Africa. You know, there was a lot of positive talk. There seemed to be momentum behind it. And so he moved, but his family was still back, so he was back and forth. But his son then firmly, you know, remained in Africa, and that, that was the stuff. It really for us.

Ali Fazel 08:57
You were very young in Kenya. 10 year old. So at that time, probably you might not have asked

Lata Desai 10:36
yourself, Am I Indian?

Ali Fazel 10:38
Yeah, I didn't, I never did ask myself that question at that point. I think I knew I was East African Indian, and I only really began to think about that when we started talking about moving to Britain. And, you know, when we moved here, it was sort of like, whoa, okay. Now this is a hugely different environment. You know, although we were minorities in Kenya, we were minorities in a very different sense to being a minority in Britain. Being a minority here is, you know, there's a slight sense of apprehension, you know, you're new. It's sort of like, oh, okay, I'm new here. I don't feel very culturally in tune. You know, I'm talking about when I first moved here, whereas in Kenya, you've almost got this privilege of being a minority, because you you know, unfortunately, the way that things were set up in colonial Kenya is that the Asians are very much in, you know, the middle, right? They were bit above the local community of the black community, and then they were beneath the whites. And I think it worked for them. So they let it happen and and that, that sort of perception never left, even after the British left. And you know, you'll know that. And so we had this privilege, almost, of being aged, being Indian, and, you know, it was sort of, and I, unfortunately, I think it was in built into the way, you know, brown people there and Indian people there live their lives. So when you came here as Indians, I think at that point, really started to think, Okay, now we're really, now, this is the minority experience where you've got to sort of, you've got to adjust to the culture a bit more. You know, we, we didn't really do much of that in Africa, I think, and it's a shame looking back, I think there's so much more we could have done to be more accommodating.

Rolf Killius 12:36
How was the relationship when

Rolf Killius 12:38
you were young?

Ali Fazel 12:40
Yeah,

Rolf Killius 12:41
in Mombasa,

Rolf Killius 12:41
between the different communities, were you together in schools?

Ali Fazel 12:44
Yeah.... So I start at home. At home, Of course, it was more like an extended family. You know, I say this, but we were hugely connected to our house help and our community at home. We had, you know, as as many, as many sort of families do in Africa. You have, you

know, house help, and we had that. And one of them, her name is Zaituni. I call her Nuni. I've always she, she's like a second mum to me. I was on FaceTime to her yesterday, you know. And She only speaks Swahili, and you know, we still communicate in Swahili, and she was there. She was employed what went but just before I was born, specifically to be sort of around to support my mom with with me. And up until the day we left, she was part of the family. She genuinely is like a second mother. And you know, when we left, there was a real it was so pain. That was probably the hardest goodbye I had, and I still remember it, and I and to this day, actually, she still carried on working with the family because of that close connection we've built. So within the family environment this, it was an extended family. Of course there was, you know, you think back now and you do, thank God we were so we were so immune to this whole there was obviously a hierarchy, right? Because it was house help and and, you know, family and stuff. And it still does feel slightly uncomfortable looking at it back now, but actually there was so tightly knit and, you know, there was such a core part of our experience and our lives that we wouldn't be able to do without them. At school, it was slightly different, and I think because in school, so I went to the Aga Khan Academy in Mombasa. And you know, you had a real eclectic mix of people. You had, you had sort of expats who had moved and they lived in in Kenya as well. And they sent their children there. You had Indians, you had Ismailis, iItnashris, you had Hindus, Muslims, all sorts. They were there. And then you also had black children there. So you had a real mix. But you would find that sort of grouping that would happen, you know...Aah... With all the Indian parents, with all the Indian kids, our parents all knew each other. They'd meet up on the weekends, and so it created that dynamic. Having said that, though, between the Indian kids, there was no real barriers at all. Regardless of were you Hindu, Muslim, Christian, it really didn't matter that there was just we were also attuned culturally, that it didn't really matter what your background was. From that point of view. Of course we all, you know, we all integrated and mixed and mingled, as you do as kids in school. But as I think people grew older, you know that you'd get those sort of differences, and that would begin to develop slightly more with communities and that kind of thing. But yeah, a really eclectic mix. And I think as well, because of the nature of the school, we had teachers coming from Britain, we had teachers coming from the US, so that really impacted the way that, you know, we saw school. And I feel really privileged to have been able to go to that school, as opposed to any other school in Mombasa, because I just feel it gave you such an incredible view of the world that was so international, so you know, outward looking, which is which in a small town like Mombasa, is quite hard to get actually. So I feel really lucky actually to have had that opportunity.

Rolf Killius 13:50
Talking about your experience. Can you tell us something about the languages? You already mentioned, Swahili, other languages?

Ali Fazel 16:25
Yeah. So obviously English was we always spoke English at home. But we are, we're from, we're Gujarati Kutchi. So we speak, we speak Kutchi and Gujarati. So there's always a joke that Kutchis will speak Gujarati, but Gujaratis won't try and speak right, even though we are from Kutch. So we are from Gujarat ourselves. So Kutch is obviously a district within

Gujarat, so it makes sense. So we spoke Kutchi. I spoke Kutchi with my grandparents and my grandmothers, but with my parents we spoke English, with the house help, we always spoke Swahili. And with locals, when we're out, we'd speak Swahili. So there was a real it's quite a dynamic mix, right? Because you and you learn to switch between languages quite quickly, you know? And, and funnily enough, I'm sure other people will have said similar is you get this hybrid of languages eventually, and even up until this day. You know, our Gujarati has Swahili words mixed into it. Our English will have some Kutchi and Gujarati words mixed into it that we sort of just have started to throw around, and people start to pick up things like, you know, sufuria in the kitchen, you know, means pot, but that's used across all three languages. I think so, yeah, so, so, quite, quite a few, actually, yeah.

Rolf Killius 17:47
Food is also something..

Ali Fazel 17:48
Yeah, food, food is, is incredible. I think it tells such an amazing story, the food, doesn't it?..especially, and I say this because my experience of, you know, food in my childhood in Mombasa, but I think back now, and you know the It's little things like the, for example, one of, one of the, one of the main dishes in Mombasa Swahili dish now is Lamb Pilau, right? And you go to, like you go to Old Town in Mombasa, and you can sit on the seafront and order in Old Town, you know some amazing Lamb Pilau, which is made by the Arabs there. But, of course, that's got huge Indian influences. You know, it's an Indian dish primarily, but it's got such deep Swahili roots now as well, because it's got Swahili flavours. And a lot of these foods will have like, a coastal twist, almost. You know, the biryani is sweeter. You know, it's, you can always taste that slight difference. The masala is different to say a Pakistani biryani or an Indian biryani, you know, Mahambris, for example. Some people call them Mandazi, you know, we still make them at home. My mom still makes them, you know, they're like a sweet bread, right? And we'll, and some people, you know, I'll have Indian friends who'll say, you know, what is this? But we'll have it with curries as well, which is the sweet bread, but we have it with curries. The favourite one is Cuckoo Paaka, which is a chicken coconut, a coconut chickeny sort of dish. It's got, like, coconut milk base, but it's a spicy chicken kind of mix. And you have it with Mahambri, which is a sweet bread and, you know, or Ugali, for example, which we will now have with Indian curries as well, which is, you know, maize flour mixed in with water. So there's such a dynamic mix of flavours and stories, and, you know, cultural backgrounds, that the food sort of allows us to tell it really is incredible, and we take it for granted. But I think when I speak to friends who are not from the background about it, it really puts into perspective how cool this story actually is, and how many different parts to it there are, and the triality of these identities being Indian, British, Kenyan, it really comes out. We love a roast too now. Christmas, we alll go all out with, with a roast dinner. That one, we haven't done any fusions with so far. We've tried to keep it pure and not and not influence it too much. But yeah,

Rolf Killius 18:38
just another question in this direction, is music and dance

Ali Fazel 20:19
Yeah, yeah. It's so interesting with that. I it's so funny because, you know, although we were when we were in Kenya, and I think this is also part of that whole colonial history, there's such a large part of us that really looks up to Britain, you know, we, we grew up thinking, Oh, London and Britain, and, you know, the UK and and that sort of thing. And it, we look at it with, we looked at it with such awe and admiration. And so I think we would always try, as kids to stay up to date with, you know, Western music, and, you know, things like that. And I think maybe my, my, my experience of music is slightly less cultural, because I grew up with older siblings were listening to Chris Brown and Lady Gaga and this sort of thing. But of course, on long car journeys, I remember to from Mombasa to Nairobi, we would drive there once a year or so, you know, and we'd stop over, and that journey would be full of Bollywood music, you know, playing the whole time. Like many, you know, Indian, British kids these days, you've got this mix of Bollywood English music and, and also, I think especially after my trip to India, I've grown a huge affinity for sort of Indian classical, but also of like Qawalli music, you know, and, and the rich history is there. And we would stop in this one Sufi shrine on the way from Mombasa to Nairobi, there's a shrine, I can't remember what it's called. And you would get, you know, I still think back to now, you'd have the smell of, like, I don't know what the word is in English, but 'agarbatti' sort of the scent of it. And they would be playing Qawallis on on the way there. And there's, there's, yeah, it, there's so much to it, I think. But yeah, I suppose that's probably.

Lata Desai 22:06
You know all these influences of your childhood, Indian as well as African. So when you came to Britain, did you feel confused?

Ali Fazel 22:19
You know, I think when I first came to Britain, I was only 12, 11, 12 or so. So you don't really think about your identity too much at that age, you know, you're sort of just a kid. And, you know, I didn't really think too much about moving to Britain. I'm almost quite pleased that I was quite young, because, you know, the older you get, the more these things impact you and and now I think back to my parents, who had lived in Kenya for decades and then moved to Britain. That must have been incredibly difficult. And I remember some, some, you know, sometimes it was really hard for them. Of course, it would be, you know, you you uproot your entire life to move to Britain. So I think there wasn't necessarily confusion as such. It was, I was very much just go with the flow, see how it is. And it wasn't until, I think I was around 17 18, that I really started to try and understand more about my identity, you know, you know, how British am I? obviously still really Kenyan, you know, like, this thing's not come off my wrist for decades. Yeah, you know, I'm 26 now. I think I've had it on for most of my life. So I think it was only around that age when I started doing my A levels, that kind of thing, when I started to think more. And I'd go back to Kenya and visit and and I'd think more about being Kenyan, but now also feeling quite British, and almost feeling like, I want to feel more British, because this is home sort of as well now, you know. I also, you know, grew up most of my adolescence in Britain, so that's really formative those years,

right? But up until that point, I still never really considered India much. You know, it was, I know we spoke Gujarati and stuff, but I never visited, and I'd never been part of that culture, really, until I visited India later on, you know, in the last few years. And then I started to uncover more about my Indian identity that I hadn't.. Yeah

Rolf Killius 24:11
What's your identity?

Ali Fazel 24:14
I try and lump it all together.

Rolf Killius 24:16
Don't tell us. Somebody else.

Ali Fazel 24:17
Yeah, East African, Indian, British or British, East African, Indian, you know. And there's not a form, there's not a, you know, check box on a form where I can tick that, obviously, but it anything less than that, it doesn't do justice. Yeah,

Lata Desai 24:37
You are a child of three continents.

Ali Fazel 24:39
Yeah

Ali Fazel 24:39
absolutely, yeah, for sure,

Lata Desai 24:41
You know, you say you go back to Africa. When you go there, do people see you as foreign or even in India?

Ali Fazel 24:50
Yeah, it's so interesting. Unfortunately, yes, I think they do now, you know you're seen as a visitor. You're not seen as coming back home, although I think it, for me, does feel like going back home to Kenya. But, you know, I think because of the age I left, ultimately I was quite young. You know, I was quite young so, and I've lived here more of my life than I did, you know, back there. So I think obviously I still speak the language, and I still feel very well integrated. But, you know, and I think where do I feel most at home? I think it's Britain now. And so I think from that perspective, perhaps there is that, that feeling of perhaps being a foreigner or being from abroad, maybe the word foreigner is a bit strong, I don't know, because I don't know if I'm a foreigner there, because I'm born there, you know, I live there for a lot of my life. So I don't know whether I'd say I'm a foreigner there. In India, yeah, probably am a foreigner, you know. And I think when I visited India, I felt very much like

I'm not from here, but I'm visiting. But equally, I am from here. I have such a rich history of being from here, but I can't, you know, I can't speak Hindi, and that's something I really wanted to be able to do. So, you know, I'm trying to learn Hindi now, but I think language is such a big part of it, you know. And I think that connects you with the people, the culture, the way of life, so much more than anything else does. And I think that's being able to speak Swahili and being able to still, you know, know how to interact with that culture so much more than I can with the Indian culture in India. That makes me feel so much more at home. I think there than it does in India.

Speaker 1 26:44
You say you feel more at home here? Have you ever faced racism or not not felt as one of them?

Ali Fazel 26:53
Yeah, you know, I think I definitely have. I've been lucky enough not to face sort of overt, sort of racism, you know, name calling and that kind of slurs and that sort of thing. Thankfully, I've been lucky, and I think that's probably a result of where I've lived. I've lived in Birmingham and then in London, big cities, hugely multicultural. Of course, there are race racism happens in these cities as well, but it's it's not as common, and it's probably not as overt as you know other places. So I've been lucky on that front. Of course, I think every migrant, every you know, non white person, probably at some point in their life, has experienced that sort of otherness, maybe that ostracising, maybe that sense of - is that that happened to me because of the colour of my skin, and it's so hard to to, you know, to get down to it, because you can't prove it, you know, you can't really be sure. You can't objectively say that's the reason I've had this experience. It's only a thought that you can have, and you can't really do much with it, either, you know, you can think about it, but you can't really do much with it, because these are just thoughts, and, you know, it's very easy to to get sucked into them. I've certainly felt it, yeah, at points. You know, when I was new here, I think, you know, maybe I felt it at school, to some degree. But then again, my school was hugely multicultural by the end, so I didn't really feel anymore. But yeah, I think perhaps maybe in my first few days in my workplace, not not my current workplace, but you know, in the in a working environment, perhaps I felt it to some, to some degree, maybe just sort of, you know, in politics, I felt it certainly, because politics can be quite, quite a rough game sometimes. You know, it's not always the most inclusive and exciting, and it's not. It can be quite dirty, and I think I felt it in those environments more. So I also have to consider the fact that my name is quite a Muslim name. You know, you know, I say my name, and people immediately will have judgments about who I am, where I'm from. I'm not saying bad or good judgments, but you just make judgments about people based on what they tell you. So I'm a brown man. My name is Ali even it's a very Muslim name. And so, you know, you sort of have that you have to deal with that. You know when, when you're speaking to people who perhaps you're you know you sometimes you'll meet people and you're aware that perhaps they're making judgments without me. You don't know whether those judgments are based on your race, background, religion, whatever. But sometimes you get a sense that, okay, maybe I've rubbed you up the wrong way or something.

Lata Desai 27:25
Does it bother you, your name?

Ali Fazel 29:12
No, it doesn't. You know my name. I'm my my parents are so proud of the name they gave me because there's, there's, we've got Imam Ali, right? And Shias, they've got such a, such a close connection to Imam Ali, and I'm named after him, and I'm hugely proud of my name. There's such a rich history to and it, you know, there's for our community, for our religion. It means so much. But I remember when I went to India, because you can't tell what religion you know I am. I'm not. There's no there's nothing about me that would tell you that I'm for certain religion, until I tell you my name. And I remember in India, I was travelling on on a train from Kerala to Bombay, hugely, hugely long journey, around 27 hours. And in India, you know, people are there's some aunties sat around in this carriage that we're in, and they're like looking at me, sort of, who's this guy? He's got a massive backpack. And I could see them quite curious about who I am, and that kind of thing. And so the guy with Chai comes on the train, you know, offering Chai. And I was like, Yeah, I'll have some. And, and then we and then we have Chai. And, and I, you know, we start to talk, actually. And we're like, oh, like, you know. And they're like, where are you from? You know, you the standard inquisitive aunty questioning that you get from from them. And I said, Yeah, I'm from, I'm from the UK, but I'm actually Indian, and I'm visiting sort of, and they started to talk to me a bit more about India and their experiences, and it got on to politics. And I love a political chat. So I, you know, I love talking about Modi, and, you know, it's tough the political scene in India, and they were telling me just how much they love Modi and how much they love the BJP, and how great the BJP is, and all of this. And I was, I was like, you know, I've got my reservations about what the BJP believe in, and that sort of thing. And so it was so fascinating. And then by the end of the journey, they asked, Oh, like, what's your name, sort of thing? And I said, my name is Ali. And they're like, ohhh..., okay, almost this realisation that, God, we've just been telling this, you know, this Muslim guy, how much we love the BJP. And I was obviously, you know, I was counter, counter arguing, you know, some of the Muslim experiences of the BJP and that kind of thing. And it was so fascinating. So I think it was that moment. And, you know, I didn't want them to worry, you know, I don't want people to have to feel like they have to guard themselves. And I kind of liked not people not knowing, because it meant that they didn't hold back kind of thing, you know, if at all they were going to so, yeah, it's interesting.

Rolf Killius 32:47
Would you like to talk about your community?

Ali Fazel 32:50
Yeah, I do. I certainly do. I think the East African, Asian community, you know, with there's such a rich history, then it's not told enough at a time right now, where migrants are demonised so much, and there's, unfortunately, there's a perception of migration that is really so tainted, so negative. And you put you contrast that to the story of, you know, say, let's be

specific, the Ugandan Asian experience of 1972 moving to Britain. I think there's around almost 30,000 of them who moved. There is so many lessons to be learned from that we don't use it enough as a benchmark for what you know, the migration story could look like. We just don't, and it's such a shame, because there's so many lessons to be learned for for the children of that, for the children of that community as well, we don't talk about it enough. We just don't. And I think it goes back to that point around that generation was so happy to suppress a lot of that, to just, you know, let it be, because it doesn't help us with integrating. Doesn't make us better British people, to talk about how much the British oppressed us and and, you know, I think now is the time to have that conversation, because that community has proven itself to be so, you know, and you shouldn't have to prove yourself to make this place your home. But that community has, you know, they've been hugely successful in politics, business, you know, the arts, whatever. And I think to be able to tell that story, and to be able to talk about it openly, there's we can learn so much from it. We really, really can. Yeah,

Rolf Killius 34:34
Would you like to talk about your religious community as well?

Ali Fazel 34:39
Yeah, I do. I do. I think perhaps, yeah, perhaps, I think that one is, is, of course, I'm hugely proud of, you know, being a Khoja with just what being from Kutch is. And I think our religious identity is so tied into being Khoja with being from, you know, from Kutch and being from Gujarat and so our community in Birmingham that I attend is so that religious community so intertwined with being Indian and being khoja that we almost conflate the two sometimes. We, I think we've got, you know, we've got the added struggle if we're also we're Muslim, and I think there are huge connotations that people have with that, and we have the challenge of navigating that in, you know, in our lives in Britain,

Ali Fazel 35:31
Being Muslim is it's not easy, I think in this environment, you know, in in the west at the moment, probably, and I don't want, I don't want to sound like, you know, all soppy about it, because, you know, we're still proud of being Muslim and, you know, but I think it's such a huge community with so many different perceptions of Islam. And I know I'm biassed and, you know, but I think what we did so well in East Africa is portray a really positive version of Islam that was so open, you know, that was so inclusive. We had friends who were, you know, from all sorts of backgrounds. It really didn't matter. And unfortunately, we've lost so much of that in this country with with the community, and I think it's the Muslim community, also the the wider East African Asian community. We don't have those bonds like we did back in Kenya or in Africa. You know, really didn't matter where you came from in Uganda, if you were, if you were Asian and you live, you were all part of the same story. You're all part. You all live the same sort of life, you know, we you'd go to the Mandir and celebrate Diwali if you were Muslim, and you'd come to the mosque and commemorate Muharram if you were, if you were Hindu as well, you know. And there's loads of Hindus who, you know. And Muharram is the commemoration of the death of the grandson of the Prophet, Imam Hussain. And it was still such a huge event for so many Hindus as well. I remember being in

Mombasa during the 10th of Muharram, which is Ashura day, which is the death anniversary of of the Prophet's grandson. And there's a procession that goes around the town. And I remember so, so vividly this, these Hindu a group of Hindu ladies stood outside the mosque just in so much awe of what they were seeing, you know, flooded with tears, just hugely appreciative of what they were seeing, which was a Shia Muslim commemoration of the death of the Prophet's grandson. And but they were so, so involved, and so, you know, invested in it. And equally, we were invested in in in the holidays and and the festivities of the Hindu community, you know, we've, we've been to mandirs and done garba and all of that sort of stuff, you know, dandia and all of that. And it was such a big part of our, of our upbringing there. But we've lost that, and I don't know how we get it back. It's, it's so sad. I think the community there was smaller. It made it easier here. Here we've all siloed so much. And even within the Muslim community were siloed, you know, you know, the Ismaili, the Itnashris, we are seen as so separate to some of the Sunni communities, you know, who do you? And there's so much friction there. We're so divided. It's almost like a nostalgia, almost of what was in East Africa and how we managed to make it work so well.

Lata Desai 38:32
Even your generation, Shias and Sunnis, even they have still that animosity?

Ali Fazel 38:41
Unfortunately, yes, I think, yeah. And I remember, I remember just the stark contrast I saw when I first moved to Britain. And I moved to Birmingham, which is, you know, that's got a large Muslim population. Remind you, I'd come from Mombasa, right? I had Hindi friends, ismali friends, Itnashri friends, Christian friends, white friends, black friends. It was really so diverse. And I moved to I remember moving to Birmingham and not really thinking that my faith was controversial at all, right, because it was so accepted and normal. You know, back home and I moved to Birmingham, I went to a school which was actually a fairly inner city school. It was, you know, wasn't performing very well. There was, you know, I moved here, I just needed to start schooling, right? There wasn't really, I didn't have the luxury of waiting and deciding to pick a school and all of this. So I just went to the the one that I could get into. And I remember some boys there who asked me, you know, are you Shia because my, because of my name? And I said, yeah, yes, I am. And that was my my biggest regret was telling them I was Shia because I was then for the, for the, three years, really, that followed. It. Is always like, Oh, but you're different, right? Because you guys do this. And are you guys really Muslim, you know? And there's this word thrown around, Kafir, which means disbeliever, such a strong word, right? Such a such sort of ugly connotations to it. Never something I'd even heard of before, but these people were brainwashed. You know, you grew up in such a monoculture in parts of Birmingham, unfortunately, which, you know, we say Birmingham is multicultural and diverse, but it's not integrated at all. And that is one of the biggest challenges, I think, we face as a country, which we underestimate, is that, unfortunately, you know, migration is beautiful. It should be celebrated. But if there is a failure for those communities to become part of the wider fabric, then it's a huge failure. And I say that because we also fail to do that to some degree in Kenya, right? And that's why we had challenges in our own ways. But you look here and that sort of questioning, that

understanding of you know, you are a disbeliever. You are so far away from my belief that these we were like, 13, right? 12, 13, 14, we were in high school, but suddenly I felt like I stopped. I had to start defending my faith. And I never thought about it like that. I was, I was a kid, you know, you think about having to defend your Faith, and eventually I just stopped engaging with the conversation altogether, you know, because I didn't, I didn't want to. And it's, it's, it's quite tough, you know, for a kid, you know, at the time, I just sort of shrugged it off. It wasn't that big deal. But you think back to it, and I would talk to my parents about it, talk to my parents about it, and you know, they would be quite concerned about it as well. But yeah...

Lata Desai 41:48
Just want to ask you we talked about the colonial past. I mean, what is your attitude? What? What do you think of the colonial story, and do you feel that they teach enough in this country or make people aware of the colonial..you studied here...

Ali Fazel 42:08
Yeah,

Ali Fazel 42:08
You know what? My it's so funny because people talk about this. I didn't have any any at all from from year eight onwards, which is when I moved to this country, no teaching of the colonial history at all, neither positive nor negative, almost not mentioned at all, which was so bizarre to me, right now, I came from Kenya, where we had spoken about the British all the time, right? Because we had been colonised by them. We had, you know, we had taken in so much of their culture, their view of life. It was such an intrinsic part of our new identities as Kenyans, whereas I came here and it wasn't talked about at all right, it was only when I got to university that I started to look into it more, because I had that intellectual freedom to do what I wanted, I started looking more into our story as East African Asians, and of course, that was hugely tainted by our colonial past. And I still feel to this day that I don't know as much about it as I should. We only talk about the positive side of colonialism. I didn't talk about it at all. And I don't know if that experience is unique to me, but actually, I think a lot of people, if you ask them about the colonial past, they won't really have much to say about it. What positive or negative? It's just something that happened, and it's not really an opinion that they have, you know, they hold an opinion about so it's certainly something we need to talk about more. It needs to be built in both both sides. You know, I look at, I remember talking to my the generations above me and my family, you know, like my grandparents generation and people of that sort of level, and they look back at it, and it's so interesting to hear the way they talk about it, because, you know, you'd, of course, it was so tough for them, and you'd expect them to hold them almost some level of discontent or resentment, but it's the opposite. You know, they adore Britain. And I think that's another reason why they that community has done so well for itself, is because they have a genuine adoration for Britain. And, you know, a lot of them look back and say, you know, before we gained independence, things were so much better in the sense of corruption in Africa wasn't an issue, you know, it was systems, you know, ran more effectively. You know, however, you've got to understand

that they're saying that within the context of where they sat within that colonial past, they were privileged in many ways themselves, right? So ultimately, it wasn't the British, it wasn't England's country to rule, right? So, of course, of course, independence was a good thing. But when they talk about it, you know, it's so fascinating that it's not negative, it's not a negative experience that they see. Of course, there are people who, you know. Asians who were part of that freedom story and part of that, you know, that history, but not in my family. And now I look at it, and of course, it's so much more nuanced than that, and I look at it within the lens of being raised in Britain as well of learning more about it from an educational standpoint at university, understanding that we were really privileged in our position there, and I think those nuances are not really acknowledged within the community that we're in, let alone the education system. I think that has a really long way to go. Yeah..

Lata Desai 44:33
You're calling Britain your home now? Does it ever bother you that history could repeat itself, and something like what happened in Uganda could happen here, and where would you go?

Ali Fazel 45:51
Yeah, you know what? People have say that to me, yeah, to be honest with you, doesn't frighten me that that doesn't seem like a realistic outcome. I cannot see a world where, where, you know, Britain says to the Asians to get I just can't see it. Maybe I'm being naive and overly optimistic, but I just feel in a country, you know, I'd say in the US is a different story, right? But in this country, where we've had in an Indian Prime Minister, and you know, where we've made such great strides compared to the other parts of the Western world, and of course, we've got our challenges, I just don't see a reality where, you know people, any community, are told, get up and get out, and there's no space for you, and you've only got this much time and and I know maybe the ways that it would happen if it was to happen now, would be more systematic. It would be slightly more nuanced, almost like a phasing out of a certain type of people. It's not something I worry about, particularly because I, One ... I just don't see it happening, you know? I and I think the other reason is because, and again, I caveat this with perhaps there's an element of naivity here, right? But I feel very much at home here, right? I don't know whether it's because London, Birmingham, these places are hugely diverse. I don't feel out of place. And I think it's so, so important to feel not out of place. You know, I can go on the tube, I can go into a pub, I can go to work, and I still will not feel out of place, right? There was a time probably I did realistically. I think there was, of course, there are environments where I do think, okay, yeah, I am the only brown person here, and you're aware there is an awareness of the fact that there are hugely white spaces. And you know you perhaps, you know you're not white, and you have an awareness of that. But I don't think that takes away from your sense of belonging in this country. You know, you've got to balance all these different parts of your identity, right? I would be un it would be sort of, I wouldn't be true to myself if I didn't maintain all parts of my identities, being Muslim, being Shia, these are as important parts as being, you know, Indian, East African, British, like all of these parts form who I am. So to say, one, you know, become stronger than the other. Is is unfair. I think it's unfair to myself. It's not a true reflection of who I am, and

it's it's down to me to sort of have that understanding of the various parts of my identity, the various nuances, but also to accept them all right? I can't. It would be wrong for me to push some away and to try and be more one than the other. And I can, of course, there are parts that maybe I relate to more in my day to day life, in the sense of, you know, where I work, how I live, what I do. You know, so much of that is British, but so much of my view of life and understanding is Muslim and is is based on my understanding of religion and God. And you know, so those parts are as important. And so, you know, you mentioned the mosque, and, you know, religious practices and rituals that has always been part of my life, like from as far as I can remember in Kenya, you know, going to the mosque, being part of that community, so that I don't think that will ever feel unnatural to me. You know, I will always perhaps be cognizant and aware that some of this is so different to other parts of my life, but actually it's still part of my life. It's still part of who I am that will never change.

Lata Desai 49:29
Just want to talk a bit about your wishes and your expectations of what should change in society from what you are talking now, and would you like people to obviously, like, you know, accept Muslim boy or,

Ali Fazel 49:46
Yeah, yeah. I think it's such a tough question, isn't it? There's so much to it. I think, I think the one thing I just wish people would understand. Is just how different our communities are. You know, the East African Asian community, I think, is so unique in so many ways to other communities, and other communities are unique in their own ways. But often when we're talking about, when we're having these policy discussions, and we're talking about immigration and, you know, diversity, we're lumped together so much as communities, and I just wish there's a greater understanding of our histories, where we come from, why we are the way we are. Not enough people understand our background because they don't know about our history, right? Because why would they? We don't talk about it well, like we do, but we as a country, don't talk about our histories very well. It's not part of our education system. So I just wish there was a greater awareness about that and the nuances of it. I think the thing that worries me the most is the direction that we're headed in as a country when it comes to migrant communities and diversity, because it's all well and good, you know, saying yes, we we need to all, you know, we need to all live together, and we need to make this work, and we absolutely should be, you know, being a compassionate country who takes in refugees, who takes in migrants, because we were recipients of that. So we must please supporters of it. But there is a responsibility on government, on policy makers, on migrant communities as well, right? We don't talk about it enough, and on societies that they they move into. All of those groups have a responsibility to make it work. And unfortunately, I don't think any of those groups, really, in today's day and age, are really pulling their weight when it comes to that, right? There is no strategy for integration that the government has that is solid, that, you know, really supports migrant communities once they move to Britain to actually integrate positively. They just, you know, people come in and then that's it, right? Where are we talking about, you know, British culture, you know, language history, right? These things are, these are, this is our culture, right? So if we're going to maintain some

element of shared identity, right, which I think is so important as a country, otherwise, we just fragment completely. If we're to maintain that there has to be some sort of policy led discussion around how migrant communities create a sense of belonging in Britain, because there isn't the second is on migrant communities as well. Unfortunately, they don't feel the need to do it, I think, in the way that I think sort of say the Ugandan Asians did, because they had no choice but to right this had to be home for them because they had no other option. A lot of other communities have an option to go back, so, but that's fine, right? If you've got the option to go back, that's great. But actually, there's no longer an understanding, I think, that you have to give to the country as much as you take from it. And I think that's something that I'm so proud of. You know, East African Asians, in the sense of they had a real sense of social responsibility to their communities, to their neighbourhoods
right? And you see that in the way that they are, in the careers that they've gone into, in the stories that they tell, in the way that the community is now portrayed, right? That sense of social responsibility, you know, you know that that's going away. Unfortunately, I feel and that is so important, so we need to be talking about that more. And then also, as always, the society in Britain, you know, the communities that they're moving into, they've always had a responsibility to make people feel welcome, to give them a chance, right, to include them in, you know, invite them to, you know, your village do's and your pubs, and you know, invite them to attend these events, and you know, your street fairs, and make create an environment where people feel like they want to be part of that community, if you know, and again, that's not happening either. So I just, I'm quite worried about the trajectory of the country, the social dynamic, because what it means is that people will continue to make judgments, continue to divide themselves, and then you don't get the opportunity, really anymore, for people to become part of one identity, right, which we still can which we still can be. There has to be a common denominating factor that ties everyone together, regardless of what background you're from, what your religion is, there has to be an identity that brings us all together, right now that is really at risk I think