

Interviewee : Mira Salat

Interviewers : Lata Desai/Rolf Killius

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Address : **6 Eastlake Road, SE5 9QL**

SUMMARY

Mira Salat, a Kathak dancer and Gujarati folk enthusiast, discusses her family's migration history from India to the UK, highlighting their struggles and contributions to the Gujarati community. Mira's parents faced racism and hardships, but built a community that supported cultural preservation. Mira emphasizes the importance of Gujarati heritage, noting her mother's role in promoting dance and culture. She addresses the caste system's impact and the need to break stereotypes. Mira co-founded Red Lotus Events to promote Gujarati culture, overcoming initial scepticism and now engaging

27,000 people. She stresses the importance of funding and support to sustain cultural traditions.

Outline

Mira Salat's Family Background and Early Life

- Mira Salat introduces herself as a Kathak dancer teacher and Gujarati folk enthusiast, born in London.
- Her mother was born in Dutch, Gujarat, and her father in Nairobi, Africa.
- Mira's father's family moved frequently for work, initially to Jamnagar in India, then to Nairobi, and later to the UK.
- Mira's parents had an arranged marriage through family friends, and they migrated to the UK after an engagement period.

Reasons for Family Migration and Early Life in the UK

- Mira explains that the family moved for better work prospects and survival, initially to Africa and then back to India before settling in the UK.
- Her father and uncles worked laborious jobs while attending school, which was challenging but necessary for their survival.
- Mira shares stories of her father's experiences with early racism in the UK, including sneaking out of school to play music and facing racist attacks.
- Her parents were part of the initial community that created a temple and a Gujarati convenience store on Ealing Road, London.

Building a Community and Cultural Preservation

- Mira's mother started Gujarati schools in the temple, which were crucial for preserving the language and culture.
- Mira grew up in a diverse school environment, where she was a minority, but felt comfortable due to the community her parents built.
- She notes the segregation between British-born Indians and migrated Indians, even within the same school.
- Mira's mother and father worked hard to create a life in the UK, and Mira acknowledges the sacrifices they made for their culture and community.

Challenges and Segregation within the Community

- Mira discusses the caste system and its impact on her family, noting her mother's dual heritage of Brahmin and Chamar.
- She questions the caste system's purpose and hierarchy, believing it was initially meant to preserve crafts and trades within families.
- Mira highlights the generational trauma caused by the caste system and the need to break stereotypes and promote equality.
- She shares her experiences of feeling like an outsider in community events due to her caste, but also the progress made in opening up cultural spaces to everyone.

Personal Journey and Professional Development

- Mira talks about her passion for dance, which was instilled by her mother, who was also a dancer.
- Despite her initial interest in architecture, Mira pursued dance professionally with her parents' support.

- Her mother's influence and her own passion for Gujarati culture and heritage have shaped her identity and career.
- Mira emphasizes the importance of owning her culture and heritage, regardless of external validation.

Impact of Colonization and Identity

- Mira reflects on the impact of colonization on her culture, noting both positive and negative influences.
- She discusses the resilience of her community in preserving their culture despite external pressures.
- Mira identifies as a British Gujarati, proud of her heritage and the diverse environment of London.
- She shares her experiences of being perceived as a foreigner in India due to modernization and her mixed Gujarati dialect.

Challenges in Preserving Gujarati Culture

- Mira talks about the challenges of creating and sustaining interest in Gujarati culture among the younger generation.
- She emphasizes the need for platforms and support to engage and educate the next generation.
- Mira highlights the importance of normalizing Gujarati culture and heritage within families.
- She discusses the role of organizations like Red Lotus Events in creating and supporting cultural events and platforms.

Funding and Support for Cultural Preservation

- Mira acknowledges the difficulty in securing funding for folk arts and heritage preservation.

- She believes that funding is crucial to document and preserve cultural traditions for future generations.
- Mira mentions the role of organizations like the Arts Council in supporting cultural events and documenting heritage.
- She stresses the need for continuous funding to create central resources and platforms for cultural preservation.

FULL TRANSCRIPT

Mira Salat 00:00
Hi, I'm Mira Salat and I am a Kathak dancer, teacher and Gujarati folk enthusiast. So I was born in London, and my mum was born in Kutch in Gujarat, and my dad was born in Nairobi in Africa. Yeah, so my dad was born in Nairobi in Africa. When he was three years old, they moved back to India for a little while. I think it was for work and jobs for my granddad, he was he travelled there, initially for work. Took the whole family there, and my dad and his four brothers were born there. They moved back to Jamnagar in India, and then after a few years, they migrated to the UK, my dad's side of the family. So my dad was schooled here in the UK, and soon after, they went back to India, where all the brothers, kind of found wives, all my uncles, my dad was through family friends, they got introduced my mom and my dad. My mom was very young. My dad's, I believe, eight years older than my mother, they got introduced, which is interesting, because it was an arranged marriage. But my mother's parents had a love marriage back in that time, which was, it's cute, so, but my mum had an arranged marriage with my father, through family friends, and after an engagement, after two or three years they married, and then they migrated over to the UK. Yeah, actually, my father's side of the family

have moved around the world a lot, actually, or the countries in question, they initially are from Jamnagar in India, in Gujarat. They then moved for work to Kutch, where they did a lot of shodhkaam (searching for work) . And then they migrated to Nairobi, where my father was born, and when we was very young, when he was three years old, they moved back to Kutch and Jamnagar, both spaces, and then moved back to the they actually moved to the UK, where my granddad was working, and my my dad and his three other brothers started schooling and working at the same time. They then moved back to they went back to India to marry through family friends, my mum and my dad got arranged marriage, and then three years after engagement, they got married and moved back to the UK.

Rolf Killius 02:49
What was their reason to move?

Mira Salat 02:51
Hmm..what was the reason to move? .. it's always been survival for the reason for moving. My dad's side of the family wanted a better life for work prospects. The caste system would only allow a certain amount of education and work opportunities in India. Coming away from that to Africa would allow for more experience in work. And actually going back to India, was only for a very short period before they tried to seek out more work opportunities and survival and, you know, finding a better life for the family. So my granddad moved the whole family to the UK, where my dad and his brothers were educated, but working simultaneously in a space that really didn't have space for them. So working, very laborious jobs, that they would have actually had a better life doing that in India, thinking about it now, but very, very hard jobs at the same time as schooling, trying to make a life of things. And then, I think once they were settled and saw that life in the UK, it only made sense for them to settle there. Going

forward, my granddad and grandmother must have seen a good future for the family at that time for them to feel like they can shift the entire life now, you know and see the future being settled here, even in such an unsettled period.

Rolf Killius 04:17
Can you tell us a bit about the early times in the UK for your parents, what did they tell you?

Mira Salat 04:23

Yeah..so on, I can only speak from stories that my parents have told me. My dad, I feel like, has more experience in the early racism of the UK, where, because he was schooled here, he tells me stories of how they used to sneak out of school to find a church hall somewhere where they would play Garba on a boom box, you know, and like, I can only imagine my dad with his bell bottoms playing garba in a church in the middle of a school day, and then he would come back but experienced racist attacks and bullying for the colour of the skin on the streets on the way home. He was also a part of a very small community of people that had come together to create a temple, one of, one of few of the first in in London was on Ealing road as one of the bigger temples now. He was a part of that initial community where they would help, you know, create a safe space for everyone. They were a part of the first Gujarati sort of convenience store that was made on Ealing road. There was a fruit and veg store that they all started working in. So they helped really build that community. They've seen it from Ealing road having one Indian shop, to having the whole street becoming mini India. And then when my mum got married and came here, she's worked on factory jobs, you know, she's travelled from Kutch, where it's actually cool in the in the evenings, to come into a place that's filled with snow. When she first came having to wear a sari because of cultural sort of necessities from my grandmother's side. But wearing a sari through the snow and slippers is just not a thing. Feels so bad for her now, but, but working having to, you know, create a family working and living in a shared

environment with like large families, sharing room space, then going out, working hard in factories, doing very mediocre jobs to try and get by, saving every penny they can. And I think what that generation done for our culture and our our lives now in the UK, we can't put, we can't put a figure to it. We can't put we can't quantify it. They created space for us. My mum started Gujarati schools in that temple. I don't know if there were any others in the UK, in London at that time, but I can say she was one that started it in Wembley. There was no other place where you could go and learn Gujarati that I know of, but I now know there were other places, like little pockets of people trying their best to keep the language alive. So in a place where I can see my dad and his brothers working to create a safe space for the community, in that same space, my mum is trying to keep the language alive at that time. So growing up in that environment, but seeing them through the hardships. I'm the youngest of three kids, so my brothers have obviously seen more of their hardships when by the time I came my mum and dad had found their own home, like we had moved out and I was must have had so much more space compared to what they did growing up. But yeah, I've only ever seen my mum and dad work really hard, and still to the day till day. I think that generation still is working so hard just to create a life here. And we've we've been born here, we've become very comfortable taking what they've created here for granted, and just, you know, try to find our own space, which is hard enough as it is, but they are. I can still see them struggling. Although they're comfortable, I can still see the struggle of them saying, Okay, well, we're still trying to really adjust, you know. But I feel like that's like a mindset thing, because I can see my mum saying, I wish I could just move back to India, but she'll be in India for three weeks. She's like, Oh, I just want to go home now. And home is London, so it's very interesting. So what's really fun for me is I went to school in Alperton, northwest London. And when you talk about minorities being white, British, British, white person was the minority in my school. It was a primarily an Asian school with lots of, you know, different races, different colours of skin, so I never knew life different to that. Growing up, my primary school was very mixed, and so was my secondary school, and I heard of and saw acts of racism outside of my

school and outside of that safe space, that community that the older generation had built around Wembley. So you would leave Wembley, and all of a sudden you stop seeing brown people, and you're like, Wait, what is this space like? Why don't they understand me? Why are they looking at me different? But in high school, we were the majority, so it felt very comfortable. However, if what's interesting is, I found a segregation between British born Indians and migrated Indians, even within the school. So you would have people that had just travelled from India, they would be completely segregated, and their culture for us at that time was completely different to us. British born Gujarati is more like why are you so Indian? You know, it felt like that growing up, there was a segregation. I am now so Indian. I feel this, and I've adopted that a little bit more. I understand the the emotions a little bit more and the differences a little bit more. So in primary school, you saw no difference. But in secondary school, although we were such a diverse school, anyone that had just migrated directly being their first generation and us being a second generation of British Indians, there was a segregation, a clear segregation within the school.

Lata Desai 10:43
You mentioned something about caste system, and I just want to dig a little bit. What is your view on the way our caste system is set up. And you know you said your parents would have been difficult because of the caste system to do on a certain type of jobs. And yeah.

Mira Salat 11:07

So for me, the caste system has always been questioned, like I always question it. My mum is two opposite spectrums of the caste system, being Brahmin and Kadia (builder) , so it's completely on the opposite side. So she obviously felt a lot of displacement within India itself, within Kutch itself. She would go to a community festival for her, for

on her mum's side, and everyone will be like, Oh, she's not. She doesn't belong here. And then she would go on her dad's side, and she doesn't belong here, and that's just within the caste. And then she got married into her dad's side caste, and it was obviously the lower one. But I've not known anything different, but for us to be doing some sort of labour as a caste, and looking back at it, we're artisans of our caste. We create beautiful statues in the history of it. So the caste system, I believe, from, and pardon my ignorance in this whole thing, was to give some sort of purpose to people saying, Hey, listen, you can pass on the craft within your family. You can teach the people this, and you're able to be a master of your craft in that and instead of respecting that everyone will be a master of their craft within their caste, they started becoming this hierarchy. And I think, through a lot of colonisation and outside views and people giving their opinions as to what they think is more superior than others, we've become influenced, and that created a lot of segregation within the rich sort of culture of what we thought that we can make specialty crafts within Family, households and things like this and generational trades, which now is, you know, it's not needed now. Everyone can learn everything. Everyone has access to education. There are schools, you know, but there was no schools when the caste system was made, you only learn from your your older generation. I understand why it was made. It wasn't ever made with the intention of a hierarchy that I believe. I do, however, believe that the country and the culture has gone through so much, and a country and a culture that can create so many things of beauty can't have thought of it to be used in this, in the manner and the misuse of how it's being used now I think, I think coming so far away from it as well. There's so much generational trauma that people have gone through because of the caste system that it's hard to let go of and trying to break that now is we should actively all be working

towards breaking that stereotype or and that thing, you know, we should be proud of whatever our past was, but know that the future is so open now, and there are so many possibilities and anyone can do anything and to respect that, I think, is what we all have to actively work towards, yeah..

Rolf Killius 14:18
Do you think it's the issue today?

Mira Salat 14:20
I believe in some places it is still

Rolf Killius 14:22
in this country.

Mira Salat 14:23
Yeah, I definitely believe that is still an issue. When we first started off Red Lotus events, my caste, for example, doesn't belong, like we have no people in the UK, in London - Kadia, if I say this caste to 1000 Gujarati people, maybe two people will know what I even am. So I grew up going, Hey, do you know me? Yeah, you must not know my caste. Like, nobody knows me. We don't exist here. So going to something like Navratri, where all Gujaratis were like, yeah, now I'm Gujarati. I don't have a place to go and belong. Um. ..People have the community garbas. We don't have a community garba. People go to the community functions. We don't have a community function. And so me, growing up, we found this niche of people that don't celebrate like Durga Ma Garba, but instead celebrate Yamuna, Ma garba, which is like a thread off of Hinduism or Vaishnanism that celebrates just one goddess. So actually, any other friends garbas I would go to, everyone looked at me like an outsider. Why is she here? The same thing my mum felt actually, in Gujarat, being from two different castes, I felt like an outcast here, because I wanted to be a part of these things I am interested in, you know, garba and music, it's in me, so wanting to be invited to other community garbas, or want to go and be looked at the same, that just wasn't a thing. And it wasn't that they knew my caste, and so they looked at me differently. They just knew I wasn't of their caste, and so they looked at me differently, and that just

wasn't okay. And I think as you grow up, you understand that's not okay. Otherwise it just feels normal. It's okay. I go here. I don't really belong here, but I want to play anyways. But when adulting, when we did, when we put red lotus events together, and myself and Priti kind of grew on this. It became an open community, open for all platform, where you don't have to be of a particular caste or a particular community in order to enter. You don't have to pay a higher fee because you're not from the community or the caste, because that's that's also a thing. It's still a thing. So everyone is welcome here, no matter you don't have to be Hindu, you don't have to be Indian, you can be anybody. Just come and enjoy the culture for what it is. And for me, that is a massive step. And seeing that model, like people have opened up their garba and Navratri events for other outsiders, I'm saying outsiders, outside of the community, members to come and be involved in their gorba, because we need more of that. We need more people to open up their doors. But it really needed a huge example to say, hey, something can be successful here again, I think in the UK, it was a safety net, having a community that, you know, you've maybe travelled, and you're like, Okay, you know, I come from this community. You come from this community. We're family. Let's work together to make something for our family. Oh, you're also from our family. Let's work something out. But I think it became so narrow because that's what they could handle at the time that anyone from outside, actually, I can't accommodate for you right now, turned into through generations, turned into, actually, wait, you're not allowed. And that transition needed to have been smoother. It doesn't matter. It's happened, and now what we can do is blur those lines actively and say, Hey, we don't need that anymore. We have the capacity, we have the resources to open our platforms up to everyone, let if they're from our community or not

Rolf Killius 18:10

just coming back again. To you, spoke about the secondary school that was quite less diverse, I think.

Mira Salat 18:18
Yeah.

Rolf Killius 18:19
And did you ever got the impression that people from the majority population, white, British, they question you whether you belong, whether you belong to this country, whether you're foreign or foreign origin, or where you really come from? Did you come across this?

Mira Salat 18:38
So it's really funny, because in in secondary school where Indians were the majority for myself, I actually questioned when I saw a white person on Ealing Road because I was like, Are you lost? Do you need help? I can guide you out of here. If you need it, got a blink twice if you need help. It was that. It was that, because I was like, I don't understand, are you? Why do you need to be here? I was there in that space, but actually everywhere i and that was like a place where the temple was, it was a place where my home was. It was a place where my school was. However, when my dance was was in Central London, where that taught me the rich history of being Indian, not necessarily Gujarati, in this tiny little hub or a safe space, um, where the vastness of understanding Indian cultures in this British building in Central London, like surrounded by, obviously, a very diverse there, a very diverse people population. Again, it was a safe hub because it was a school of Indian Arts. So it became, oh, people understand me here, I'm Indian. I'm in an Indian place. I'm here to learn Indian Arts. I fit, I belong, where we were going to present those Indian Arts weren't always safe spaces. They weren't always places where people knew why we looked the way we do. What's really

interesting now even actually, I'm going to rural spaces around UK, where, when we enter that space, that enter that Village, we are still the only brown people in that entire village population. They do look at us funny. Why are you here? And maybe there's that one Indian corner shop in that rural village, because that's what we do. The top there's a, you know, every corner shop anywhere is run by an Indian. They question us, which I find...I find it is what's brought our community to the existence it has at the moment. They question, why are you here? What do you? What do you? What do you want from being here right now? You don't belong here. We have this corner shop. You're here to dance, so we don't understand who's going to see you. You don't belong in this space. But equally, in those rural spaces, we found that the communities are interested in knowing about us, we're able to present our culture in a respectful manner, with a backbone, with our heads held high, and said, hey, you know, your forefathers travelled across the world to see us, to see what we have to offer you, and we're here coming to you, you know, presenting it to you, you're welcome. But they also see it in the sense of, this is really rich culture, and it's really rich heritage, and they're thankful and grateful for us to be able to share it with them, which I find I'm really grateful for that safe space. I'm grateful that I can travel in a group with other people, that I also feel safe around, that when they do question things and I think, oh, I don't know what they're asking me, or if they look at me because I'm brown. I've got my brown friend next to me, which I feel that my parents probably didn't have. My dad probably walked down the street by himself, where he got attacked, where I have a safe person next to me. So if they do question something, we can both stand with our heads held high, you know, and I think that the transition of the times has been, is is happening. It's said, it's there. But it's really interesting to see how minorities and majorities are working. I think if I've developed myself into being a person that owns who I am so much now in my culture and my

heritage, not and not being arrogant about knowing everything. I don't know everything about my heritage, but I'm proud of which I wasn't earlier as a child, I would question it. But now, if I'm in a space where I have to prove to be worthy of being in a space just because my skin is different, I wouldn't feel like I need to prove that. I would just feel like, well, if you don't have the understanding of the diversity of the world, then that's your problem, you know. But yeah..

Mira Salat 18:54
You said your when your parents came, they created space. When your dad used to work in the temple, mum opened up. Is that how your dance journey started, what got you into dance?

Mira Salat 23:34
So my, my mum's really great culture and dance and music enthusiast, and her entire family love music, and so she used to be a dancer when she was young, and she used to do Kathak when she was a child. Post marriage, she came to the UK, and there was nothing for her here to continue that. And also that generation, you get married, you come here the layer, yeah, you can do anything you want after marriage. And it didn't quite, it didn't quite translate that way. Obviously, there was no opportunities. You have to work. You have to put, you know, food on the table, have a family, all of these things. So she couldn't continue that, so she really actively took a role in making sure that the culture was exposed to us. She's the one who put me into dance. I don't know my life without dance. The few times I've found myself without dance, I've found myself lost. It really grounds me. It keeps me connected to who I am. It keeps me connected to what my heritage is, but I feel like my mum instilled that in me, and that passion is out and out, a shared passion. It's not something that I ever felt forced to do. She tried with my brothers. They danced. They enjoyed it. They weren't very good at it. They came out of it. They

found other things, other access points of music and and design and but my mum really wanted to make the arts accessible to us, and I'm grateful for that.

Rolf Killius 25:14
You know that you're today a professional. Did she also wanted you to become a professional in this area.

Mira Salat 25:24
Yeah, I think I'm really lucky, because my parents have always said, do whatever you want, but do it well, and whatever you want to do, just follow it through. So me, being a dancer, had been dancing since I was five years old. They've invested in it since I was five years old as well. But I actually wanted to go into design and architecture and all of these things. So actually, it's the other way around with me. Where they were like, do whatever you want. I was like, but I think I want to be an architect and, like, redesign homes and turn them around and things. But actually, when I was at university studying architecture, I was there for a year, and I was so not in touch with my dance. And I spoke to my parents, thankfully, they said, Well, leave it if it's not making you happy, stop you've been dancing dance. Take some time. Figure it out. I'm so grateful for them. My dad, with his carpentry and building skills, like we built the studio that was in the back of my house. So I stopped architecture, but we built the studio, the architecture put me in touch with my my roots of the carving in the building, and it goes back to my caste and wanting to build things, but we built the studio. Even when I was doing architecture, I wanted to create dance spaces, that was the vision. So we created the dance studio in post me coming out of university, and my mum was like, just do this. Do it well , we've invested in it. You're good in you're good at it. You have the potential. And I think that it's the her passion and her

follow through, of making sure she was behind me, pushing me the entire time, that's seen me through to be a professional Kathak dancer now and today. And she's always wanted that, and she's always supported it, but my entire family, yeah, they've been amazing.

Lata Desai 27:28
How did this passion for Gujarati culture and heritage and folk dance and all that that instilled in you? How did it come about?

Mira Salat 27:40
So in terms of garba, for me, I wanted to I loved the feeling of dancing garba. So actually, when I wasn't allowed or looked up funny in these different communities, when I would go to them to play garba, and it didn't matter to me, because I was having so much fun, like the rasa , the emotion that comes from dancing, that Gujarati folk dance filled with the whole of the joy, I've never missed a day of garba in my entire life growing up, unless I was out of the country, and the most depressing day of my life. And my mum's always pushed me to take me to those garba events, and actually the passion to fully go Gujarati folk..yeah came with the friendship of Priti Varsani. And when we started doing more work together and projects that we were working on together, we realised the niche at which we both shared was the Gujarati culture. She's a Gujarati folk singer. I'm a classical dancer. It's two complete different worlds. It's complete different worlds, and there's a sort of elitism that comes with the classical side that actually don't want to associate myself with I want to be on the folk side having fun, but also want to have fun here. And I kind of access the folk through, like the temple music, through bhajans and songs like this, but actually going to her concerts, post a friendship, being exposed to more of it. Wanted ..it fuelled some sort of fire in me to want to learn more about it. I then really get obsessed once I like something, to learn more about it and learn everything I possibly can,

which I kind of follow through with, actually, even with garba, I have to say, since I was a child, my mum's always put me in traditional clothes. I've never gone in a sort of Western attire, or more modern India, like Indian clothes, even to garba. Garba is garba that is the chance for you to be yourself. And my mum's. always put that in me. Put a full Chaniya Choli on. Put the mirrors all over your you know, chest. Put, you know, dots, not just one Chandlo, I've never had one chandlo, when it came to garba, I've always had at least six. And people will be like, You're mad. And I'm like, Yeah, well, that's what I'm gonna do. And because I knew it growing up since a baby, I've only dressed up fully traditional during garba, when people started being modern with it, or actually, when I saw people around me not really dressed up fully traditional, I was like, well, you're missing out on being super fun. So I have to say that was a major sort of influence in like Gujarati culture, like dressing up to be the ultimate you. I felt like I still feel when I'm in Gujarati attire, traditional Gujarati attire, I feel the most as I feel the most myself. Because I feel unstoppable at that point. And so growing up knowing in that Gujarati attire, I feel that way, having that friendship with Priti, being exposed to more music, going back to Kutch, also the way that my mum has explained my Gujarati heritage and culture to me, it's always been scientific. She's always shown me the rich history. She's shown me the bad side, but she's shown me the great side as well. She's exposed me to like the SStep wells. She's exposed me to museums in Kutch, which some people just don't even within Kutch haven't seen she's exposed me to the the desert, she's exposed me to the palaces, she's shown me all of these things that's gone made me feel so proud of where I've come from. So when people now question me, I'm like, but have you seen what we have back home, which also feels like home? So I think there's a combination of lots of different things. Mum is a huge, huge player in the role, but also Priti I think currently, now, I'm proud to say that mum sometimes looks at me and says, you know, how do you

say this in Gujarati? And I have to help her, because she's been speaking English all day at work, and I've been talking Gujarati all day at my work, and it's the cards have flipped, and it's really fun. It's so exciting. And, like, cause of Priti and the exposure to the Gujarati music, like I know, whilst my grandma was on her last, like, last days in hospital, I was able to sit with her and sing a Gujarati song that she was how do you know that song? And then she was humming it along with me, and to have that connection through that language, through the song that my grandma may have sung when she was growing up. That has come from something I've learned from a friend, as opposed to my mum. So this, and because of the community we're now building actively, we're able to find other people that also sort of enthusiasts, will have a little thread of connection somewhere that we're able to grow and explore and spark that curiosity and creativity for them to even explore that further and allow for platforms for that cultural exchange, allow for platforms for people to talk about it with pride and talk about it in a place where it's safe to walk away from it with their heads held high, saying, Hey, I spoke about my culture, and everyone really appreciated me talking about my culture, that's nice, that's different. Because actually, I think within the Indian community ourselves, we've grown up putting ourselves down. Because if again, generations of trauma, of colonisation, of people telling us we're not good enough has been instilled into we can't be Indian. We have to try and be something else. Being Indian is just not good enough to come away from that and being that actually you are good enough, you are just normal. Everyone is just being themselves. And I think it's a big job, but we can create that.

Rolf Killius 34:19
You just mentioned colonisation, is there impact other than what you just explained on your life, or you how you feel about that?

Mira Salat 34:28

It's not a geographical thing that happened. I feel like it's a it's a people and the ego thing colonisation, and I feel when we're at different parts of sort of the economy and power, it's a power game. And even within countries, people are fighting over things like just neighbours are fighting over lands, over boundaries, over your fences, over my fence. How far can you go, right? And when countries are taking over, at what point do we just be Hey, what we've got is enough, you know. And I think for me, on two.. in two ways, as a classical dancer, colonisation to into India has brought richness into the art form that I practice, Kathak, for example, when the Mughal Empire took over, took over India, it's bought a whole other aspect to the dance form. But actually, when the British took over India, we almost lost it, and to know that that was It's kept alive, the the sacrifices that haven't have happened in

order to keep it alive, they are extremely sad and heartbreaking, but the fact that we've been able to rise through that as a community, as an as a country, as countries, and find some sort of, what you call it, when you find some sort of a surety with a coping mechanism, if I may say, the coping mechanism of, okay, we've been through that. But how do we move forward from this? How can we make our history strong, like make the history of what we've gone through, make us stronger? And how we can go forward? Know that if there are impacts coming our way, how we can swerve around them, or come face them head on, you know, going forward.

Rolf Killius 36:46
In relation what you just explained, as a follow up, what is your identity? How do you feel?

Mira Salat 36:59
I think, I think, Ah, look, there's not so much surety there. I identify as a British Gujarati person, where I feel I am equally proud of being

born in a diverse hot pot like London, and I wouldn't want to live anywhere else in the world. I am also equally proud of my heritage and my history and my lineage and whatever wherever that may stem off to to make me feel so rich and proud of where I come from, I feel like that gives me the richness. The reason for me to fit into this diverse hot pot comfort comfortably is because of that lineage, and I wouldn't take that away for anything. So yeah, I'm British, Gujarati.

Lata Desai 37:52
When you go to India, do people see you as a British, as a British person, I think, as a foreigner,

Mira Salat 38:03
What's interesting now, with how much India has modernised, and I feel like when we've come away from the country, we hold on to the culture as much as possible. And they're obviously moving forwards, and we are too. I go to India now, and of course, they think you're a foreigner. It's, I don't know, something in the air, something in the way we walk, they identify you as a foreigner. But because of how diverse India is now and how comfortable I am with being me, I tend to trick them a lot. So I say I am so if I'm in Ahmedabad, and they say, Are you, are you from here? I say, No, I'm from Kutch. And if I'm in Kutch, and they say, Are you from here? And they're like, and they're like, You sound so like, You're from Saurashtra? And I'm like, Yeah, I am from Saurashtra. How did you know? And I'm able to, they can't quite figure it out, because my Gujarati is so mixed up, so they can't figure out where I'm from. Good luck to them to try and figure that out. I don't think I ever fit into any one space, but in Gujarat, within Gujarat, I can easily tell them I'm from any part of Gujarat, and they would believe me, because here now in London, I speak Gujarati to so many people from different parts of Gujarat, and I don't know the difference between the different dialects. I just think everything is

Gujarati and my dialect. And so I speak all the different dialects mixed up. And I go home and I speak it to my mum, and she's like, Oh, that's new. And I'm like, Well, okay, I don't know the difference, as I just pick it up wherever I can. So when I go to India, they can't figure out from my language where I'm from, but I'm still speaking proper Gujarati with the accent from India. Um..., it's really fun. It's really fun, actually, them trying to charge you overpriced. And I'm like, don't make me. I know with I am from Kutch. You're telling me this is Kutchi hand work. And Ahmedabad when they try to tell you they're like, original Kutchi hand work. And I'm like, No, it's not. But I think, yeah, there was a time where they looked at us as outsiders. But I think with the modernization of India now, I feel like they feel like outsiders within that country. To be really frank, I feel like if we go there, we would fit in better. They can come here. We can go there.

Lata Desai 40:43
Let's talk about a bit about your work and the drive you have to keep Gujarati culture going. Can you tell us a bit about the challenges and the hopes you have for, for, for this work you're doing.

Mira Salat 41:05
I think when we first started doing the work we're doing, it was hard for us, because we were trying to create the audience for what we are doing. It didn't exist. We were trying to say, there is a need, and they're like, but we don't have a need. We're like, please understand there is a need for you to know. And until we served them with what we thought was the need, they didn't realise they needed it. And to constantly feed an audience with understanding that it is necessary for them to tap in, or even have an interest in what their heritage culture is that is the hard part of the job, because to put the work up there is actively, now a lot of people that are working towards keeping that culture part alive, but to create the audience interest is the hardest part

still. And I think since 2016 when we first did rangilo Gujarat. Till now, we've seen a ripple effect of that work, having 27,000 people attend a two day event that we've done for the first time off the back of everyone saying nobody is going to come to a Gujarati event. And we're like, Um, okay, well, we're going to try anyways, to then now, continuing that successful festivals, having hosting Navratri, that's, you know, sold out constantly, and it feels like we don't have the capacity to deal with the ripple effect of the audiences. We will constantly be working towards that. And I think us knowing that the work we're doing is rippling. It's also then about thinking about, Okay, what's phase two? Phase two is making sure that there's somebody to do our jobs. Post us. We can't be the only ones doing this. Okay? So if the ripple effect is happening, where else are we going to throw the pebbles to keep those ripples going? Like teaching the next generation that the importance of it, speaking Gujarati in a class when I'm teaching them, saying, What does that mean? Me teaching them just a little bit, and then going home and talking Gujarati to their parents, them, saying, Where did you learn that? Okay, maybe we should talk more Gujarati at home, just normalising it. I think the work we're doing is trying to normalise being who you are and being just owning it, you know. And so the work we're doing right now is on so many different levels where trying to one create a platform to present work that's currently they're created by professionals, by people who know the craft, people who are experts in their craft, whether they're visual artists or musicians or dancers, performing artists through the arts, obviously. And the second part of that is, once we've educated them as an audience, how do we engage them in actually taking on any of these sort of cultural activities, whether it's the arts or even listening, becoming an audience to the work that's there. And then once they've taken that step of I want to learn more about this, providing that support to see it through understanding that, okay, they want to learn Gujarati folk dance. They want to learn Gujarati music. Okay? What

platforms exist? If they don't exist, let's create those platforms. Okay, they've learned is now what they're going to do with this craft. We need to create a platform. It's a full circle. That platform we created initially for those professionals to present, to entice people in, to understand the culture, that platform is now for the people that put the hard efforts there. You know, we need to celebrate the fact that they've taken that on board, they've seen it through, and give them a. Platform. Say you're respected for the work that you've done, you're celebrated because of the work that you've done. And actually, you can take this culture and this lineage forward. You can take your heritage forward. You can add your own spin to it as you know. You can make it whatever you want from here. But we need to see that full circle through and I think it's constantly creating those circles and loops to to go forward. And I think that's what we're doing through Red Lotus events.

Lata Desai 45:27
I was just wondering. It's a challenge? Yeah, it is difficult to get a young Gujarati girl to come and understand what you are trying to tell them and to sustain that correct work, which you have done over the years. What are the challenges? I mean..

Mira Salat 45:44
Yeah. I think a major challenge is that the generations are constantly changing. The trends are constantly changing. The things that the new generation are engaged in is constantly evolving. The heritage is there, the prachin, the ancient history is there. But every everything after that is an interpretation of that, in order to stay up to date with how to engage with that crowd, I think is the biggest challenge. When we started, we were young, you know, we were the voices of the youth. And now we have to ask them, you know, what entices you, what brings you in? Is it is it social media? Is it digital media? Is it

physical activity? Is it interaction, or is it no interaction? Is it isolation? I think constantly understanding the change of human interaction and human engagement, that is the biggest task, because we always want that connection to be from heart to heart, ideally, and that's the only way, actually the thread of the emotions of that heritage would stay alive is through that thread of the heart, and we can only tap into the heart if we understand what they're thinking, if we understand what they're going through. So I think generational changes are still constantly happening, and we have to be sensitive to that. I think we grew up in a generation where not my parents, but I've seen it. You don't understand your culture, you don't understand your language, you don't do anything being Indian, it's like but where were the platforms? Where was the support? Where is my space to talk? I think that just can't history of that sort. Can't repeat itself. We have enough resources now to accommodate for the new generation and creating a constant ripple of leaders in the in the field, constantly teaching people to lead means that we're not holding on to the reins of this means that we want to pass the reins down. They're closer to understanding the next generation. Allow them to lead that, allow the next generation to lead that, but with the correct tools, with the heart of what the initial sort of ethos was

Lata Desai 48:13
talking about, tools to the British born institutes like Arts Council, or your local council funding? Do they see your passion when you talk to them? Or you know, because without money, you can't do this, and do they understand?

Mira Salat 48:34
So I think so it's really hard to answer that question, Aunty, because I think, as an organisation, we didn't first understand that the funding route was even an option. For mysel,. I knew that classical arts got

funding, but for folk arts and for sort of heritage and traditions didn't feel like something you can even ask the government for, because history speaking, I don't know if they want to celebrate and fund our traditions, and I think also understanding for us growing up that culture and tradition is separate from religion, and understanding that that is two different things for us has taken some time.

Mira Salat 49:24
To be really frank, I don't know if this is answer you want. I don't know if Arts Council feel the urgency of how important it is to fund this so we don't lose it. But I see with things like the heritage funding, recording of oral history, recording of voices, recording of stories, documenting these things there are, there are active organisations, like Subrang Arts that are working hard towards documenting that for future generations in order for them to go back and that work has only been happened, only going forward, because of the funding that's been provided. So even if it's in droplets right now, I feel like we need a notion of funding in order for us to create the central resource hub for the next generations to come, before we lose all of this rich culture and heritage with the generation that's going now.