

Interviewee: Pritee Varsani

Interviewer: Lata Desai / Rolf Killius

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SUMMARY

Pritee Varsani, a Gujarati folk singer in the UK, discusses her heritage and cultural journey. Born in North West London to parents from Kenya and Gujarat, she recounts her family's migration to the UK in the 1970s and the challenges they faced. Pritee's interest in Gujarati music led her to travel to India, where she immersed herself in the culture and language. She emphasizes the importance of preserving Gujarati traditions while adapting them to modern contexts. Pritee also highlights her efforts to engage the younger generation through mentorship and innovative approaches to Gujarati music, blending traditional roots with contemporary styles.

Outline

Journey of Pritee Varsani: Background and Early Life

- Pritee Varsani introduces herself as a Gujarati folk singer in the UK, born and raised in North West London.
- Her father was born in Mombasa, Kenya, and her mother in Guts, Gujarat, and they moved to the UK in the 1970s.
- Pritee's parents faced challenges adapting to life in the UK, including racism and the lack of a community.
- Growing up, Pritee spoke a mix of Gujarati, Swahili, and English, which she initially thought was standard Gujarati.

Cultural Adaptation and Parental Struggles

- Pritee's father shared stories of his life in Kenya, including his mischievous childhood and selling ice cream.
- The family faced racism in the UK, but they adapted and held onto their language and culture.
- Pritee's father was a mischievous person, often climbing trees and hassling teachers in Africa.
- The family's struggle to adapt to a new culture and lifestyle in the UK is highlighted.

Personal Experiences with Racism and Cultural Identity

- Pritee did not personally experience racism as she was born in the 1980s, but her father and sister faced it.
- Lata Desai asks about Pritee's desire to understand her roots, leading to a discussion about her travels to India.
- Pritee felt a burning desire to understand her culture and language, leading her to travel to different parts of Gujarat.
- She stayed with her music teacher and connected with local villages to learn more about her culture and language.

Connection with Roots and Cultural Immersion

- Pritee initially was treated as a foreigner in Gujarat but eventually was accepted and lived like the locals.
- She chose to live in villages and experience their lifestyle to understand her roots better.
- Pritee's connection with her roots deepened as she lived and worked with the local community.
- She felt a strong connection to her culture and language, which she had to learn from scratch.

East African Roots and Cultural Evolution

- Pritee has travelled to Kenya many times and has seen the evolution of the language and culture there.
- She feels a strong connection to Swahili, which she can understand and connect with easily.
- The culture in Kenya has evolved, with many people now being successful businessmen and living a different lifestyle.
- Pritee felt a strong connection with the local communities in Kenya, especially the Maasai tribe.

Relationships and Community Dynamics in East Africa

- Pritee discusses the relationship between the Asian and black communities in East Africa.
- She feels that the black community in Kenya has not been able to stand on their own and has relied on the Asian community.

- There have been issues of crime and job discrimination, leading to resentment among the black community.
- Pritee emphasizes the need for the black community to be given more opportunities to stand on their own.

Impact of Migration on Cultural Identity

- Pritee reflects on how her upbringing in the UK has shaped her perspective on cultural identity.
- She contrasts her experiences in Kenya with those of her family, who faced more challenges and crime.
- The evolution of opportunities in Kenya has made it safer and more prosperous for the local community.
- Pritee feels that providing more work opportunities can help reduce crime and improve community relations.

Passion for Gujarati Culture and Music

- Pritee's journey into Gujarati music was influenced by her desire to understand her roots.
- She initially wanted to pursue Bollywood music but was encouraged to focus on Gujarati music.
- Pritee's music teacher, Lalita Ben Gura, helped her learn the language and culture from scratch.
- She experienced a transformative moment during the Shivratri Mela, which deepened her connection to Gujarati culture.

Challenges and Successes in Promoting Gujarati Culture

- Pritee faced challenges in promoting traditional Gujarati music, which was often overshadowed by Bollywood.
- She organized her own Navratri events to showcase traditional Gujarati music and culture.
- Despite initial resistance, her events gained popularity and attracted a younger audience.
- Pritee's efforts to make Gujarati music cool and relevant to the younger generation are highlighted.

Future Plans and Mentorship for the Next Generation

- Pritee and her team are working on mentorship programs to engage the younger generation in Gujarati culture.
- They aim to provide a platform for kids to learn and perform traditional Gujarati music and dance.
- Pritee's niece is being trained in traditional Gujarati songs and is performing with her.
- The goal is to create a space where the next generation can feel proud of their culture and heritage.

Balancing Tradition and Modernity in Gujarati Music

- Pritee discusses the importance of adapting traditional Gujarati music to appeal to a younger audience.
- She has created British Gujarati songs that blend traditional themes with modern styles like Afro beats.
- Pritee's efforts to make Gujarati music more accessible and relevant to the younger generation are ongoing.
- She believes that by combining traditional and modern elements, Gujarati culture can be kept alive and vibrant.

FULL TRANSCRIPT

Pritee Varsani 00:00
So hi, I'm Pritee Varsani. I'm a Gujarati folk singer in the UK, and I'm born and raised in North West London. My dad was born in Mombasa in Kenya, and my mum was born in Kutch, Gujarat. And after my dad was born in Mombasa, he travelled to Kutch, and they came to the UK in the 70s, and, yeah, they travelled with my grandparents and all his brothers and sisters. They all travelled together, and they made a life in the UK. So as far as I remember, when my dad used to actually tell me that they used to travel quite a lot by boat. So them going from Kenya to India, they actually travelled by boat. And they had a bit of a struggle in in Kutch, and when they decided to come to the UK to make a life for themselves, again, being in the UK, being the first generation in the UK, was very difficult for them to fit in, because they didn't have a community here be you know, where being in India, where you've got your own people, and then coming to the coming to the UK, and facing racism, facing a lot of different things as well, and starting a complete different life, it was very different for them. However, it took a bit of a toll in their lives, but they adapted from what I remember is when they came to the UK and trying to, of course, hold on to the language, hold on to the culture. They tried to pass that on to us growing up. And I just remember growing up using, you know, speaking the language as well, where it was mixed with Swahili and Gujarati. And me growing up here with my of course, siblings as well, we actually thought that that was a normal Gujarati and speaking that language to our grandparents and our relatives as well. We actually grew up feeling that that is actually Gujarati, and it was only up until I did my own travels and went to India and understood that the language I'm speaking is completely different. And knowing that, okay, we've just adapted some, you know, adopted some words from Swahili, and the, of course, the Kutchi Gujarati as well. So it felt like we had to learn a complete different I had to learn a complete different language, which was a struggle on that side, but it was a fun process. Going back to the parents' struggle, it was, I remember my dad talking about him going to India, of course, travelling by boat, but going to Kutch and making a life for himself, because it was a complete different lifestyle for him, as well going into a different country, as well being an ice cream boy,, you know, travelling around, selling ice cream. And I remember him talking about that. He was also a very mischievous person, you know, because growing up in Africa as well, they used to do all these things of climbing up trees, and, you know, doing all these silly things. And I remember him telling me that, you know, we used to climb up trees, and we used to, you know, hassle the teachers and so on. But I guess they've all had, you know, some kind of stories to tell. But as mentioned before, when they came to the UK, it was, it was a struggle for them again, coming back down to the racism that they faced here in the UK, and just being able to adapt to a complete new culture and a new lifestyle, and being around friends and family who have also or were going through exactly the same thing, because it's not just that my family went through this whole migration period. They were also they were in a community where others were also going through the same thing as well.

Lata Desai 04:32

What about yourself? You you grew up in Kensal Rise and did you whilst you were growing up, did you feel racism in Britain,

Pritee Varsani 04:42
I personally myself, didn't feel racism, because I felt like that moment had passed during when my sister my brother were born. I was born in the 80s. So for me, it was a lot more diluted at that, by that time but yes, my dad had faced the racism with, you know, the skinheads, for example, and so did my sister, but they had travelled on and it didn't. I didn't. I've never been exposed to racism. On that front

Lata Desai 05:21
I want to ask you, just want to dissect a little bit about ...you said you go to India,

Lata Desai 05:28
obviously, to meet friends, a family and but was there a burning desire in yourself to understand your roots and what what India is all about?

Pritee Varsani 05:40
So for me, when I wanted to tap into the Gujarati music scene, for me, it was like I need to first understand my culture and my language and my people, because I can't go into something where I don't where I'm completely clueless. So that's when I decided that I want to, if I go, I want to go to a space where I'm able to dig deeper into my roots. So first of course, I went to Kutch. I wasn't getting my answers from Kutch, because it felt like everyone had moved on. So if I wanted to go back into where we have started, it felt like people had all forgotten. So then I went into a different part of Gujarat, and I stayed with my music teacher, and through her and connecting with the villages around surrounding areas, I got to understand, you know, my language, my culture, my people, and going even deeper into just learning and understanding the spiritual leaders of Gujarat and why they said what they said, why they did what they did, it made me feel more interested to learn more and more about our culture, because being born and brought up In the UK was, first of all, one - the language. It wasn't something that was, it wasn't my first language to be speaking, like, in terms of, yes, I was speaking Gujarati, you know, with my grandparents and my, you know, my my relatives. But it was, again, it was a mixture of Gujarati, Swahili, Kutchi, English, everything together, where I actually thought was that, you know, the Gujarati language. I thought I was. I knew about my culture. I thought I knew about my background being here in the UK. But when I got to travel to Gujarat, I actually got to see a complete different side. And that's when I thought, Okay, this is difficult, but I'm going to have to do this because I want to do this, and I want to learn about my culture. I want to learn my language. So that's when I sat there, learnt the alphabets from scratch, started reading the newspaper, and I feel like now I'm proud to say that I'm actually one of the best speaking Gujarati person in my family.

Lata Desai 08:05

When you were in India, did people identify you through as a foreigner, or did they take you in as one of them?

Pritee Varsani 08:15
In the beginning, they people saw me as, oh, she's come from outside. You know, she's a foreigner. You know, we need to treat her very differently. But my first trip to Gujarat, I was supposed to be staying there for three months. I ended up staying there for one year. So people started getting used to me, and I wanted that to happen. So when I went into the villages, my condition was, I don't want to be treated any different. I'm going to come and stay in your village. However, when I come and stay there, I want to live exactly like how you guys live, because I want to understand how you do things. So when I went with that condition, everyone treated me so like, treated me like their own. And that's what connected me to my roots more. And it made me feel like this is my life. This is this is where I want. This is what I want to understand. Because in the beginning it was very much like, Oh no, we need to give her a room with AC. We need to give her, you know, the English toilets and so on forth and there was so much, I know we need to make sure she has a table to sit on, you know, when she's having dinner. But they gave me the table whilst everyone around me is sitting on the floor. And it made me feel like, Why are you treating me different? I want to sit on the floor with you guys. I want to eat with you guys. You know, I want to sleep like the way you guys are sleeping. If you guys are sleeping on the floor, I want always asleep on the floor, because I'm here to experience that life. It took time for them to adapt to me, then myself to adapt to them. I was very open from before.

Rolf Killius 09:54
You have another roots in East Africa, just earlier you said you were just visited. What about the roots there? Because your Gujarati, for instance, was influenced with or sprinkled with Swahili

Pritee Varsani 10:09
Yes, So I've travelled to Kenya so many times because my family is there. Since the 80s, I've probably done more trips to Keya - No, actually, I lie - more trips now to India, but, you know, I've done so many trips to Africa, and I've seen it grow from the 80s to going there last month, actually being there in December time. And the way it's evolved, the way the language has evolved for even for me, like when they say certain things, when they're speaking to, you know, the people around them, and they use, you know, when they use Swahili words, I connect to them. It's a language that I can be like, I know what you're talking about, because we say that just at home. So I feel like picking up the language, the Swahili language, is a lot more easier for me than going to somewhere like Spain or anywhere else in the world and trying to adapt to a different language. I feel like going to Kenya, it's so much easier. Even if they're speaking to me in Swahili, I feel like I know what they're talking about, and I just feel so connected to that language.

Rolf Killius 11:21
What about the culture there? It's quite different from Gujarat.

Pritee Varsani 11:26
I feel like the culture within my within my friends and family, that has changed a lot. They are very forward thinking now, and it's the thing is, it's really hard to say, because I'm just having a conversation now without the I felt really different being around my family there this time, because I felt like they're very they were in a position where they had nothing, not a single penny before, in the 80s, 90s, growing up around them, and sorry, growing up at that time, they had nothing, and now all of a sudden, they are like the top businessmen there. So it's a complete different lifestyle, where before they would do their own work, you know, when it came to cooking or looking after the kids or cleaning the house, and now they've got, like, a few maids, and they've got cooks and chefs. So I see that as a change as well, like they're living a lifestyle, that it's just completely different whereas, and then from that, when I've even I went into the villages, when I went to do my own travels to I went to climb Kilimanjaro, and I met people, the, you know, the local community there. And I felt a home, feeling from them, more connection with them. I went to Serengeti, and I went into the Masai village. And the connection I felt with the Masai, you know, the community, was the same feeling I felt when I, you know, when we went to India and went into the tribal community, and when we did our travels to understand the tribal community, I felt that a similar connection there people that are still in touch with their roots. And that's when I when I met those people, it took me back to those villages I went to, but when I was around my friends and family, I felt like I've kind of like gone a little ahead, because they are very different to they have a very different lifestyle to the people in India and the people in the UK, not saying It was anything wrong, but it was just very different for me. Just very different. For me, it's not something I would want to adapt to.

Rolf Killius 14:08
What do you think about the relationship between the different communities there, for instance, the Asian community and the black communities? What is the relationship today?

Pritee Varsani 14:17
I don't want to say in a way where I'm offending as well,

Pritee Varsani 14:26
because in conversation, I have spoken to Mira that I feel really bad for the Africans in terms of they're never going to be able to be to have that stand in their own country? Because there was a time where the Indians were reliant. I mean, that. Uh, they've, like, the Indians there from, like, from my own family, we're very they're very reliant on these Africans to get by. They can't do anything themselves. That's how I see it with what, with my community of people that I was around when I went to Africa.

Pritee Varsani 15:22
It's just how to say it without offending I don't know. I feel like I'll say things in a in a way where I probably offend an Indian. But I feel like this is why there were lots, I mean, there were lots of like, gunshots and what do you call it? How do you say children, crimes, and you know, things like that happening before, because that black community felt like they didn't

have they weren't getting the jobs that they you know, that they should be getting. And it felt like when the Indians went there, they were getting they were doing everything, so they were being that servant to the Indians, and they weren't getting what they wanted in terms of salary wise. And so this is from my little conversations that I've had with the few the you know, people from the black communities in the past that because they don't have that. They have to try doing things to reach out to get more for themselves. So looking at it on that side, was feeling like, Okay, fine. I mean, it's not good that you're doing that. It's not a right thing to do that, but they're doing that because they want to take that stand as well, whereas currently being there in the recent times, and seeing that, you know, even being told that Pritee make sure you look after your stuff, because, you know, don't put your money lying around, or make sure you don't have jewellery lying around. You know, because our servants, they're, you know, their hands aren't clean and so on. But it just makes you think, why aren't their hands clean? That means they're not comfortable with what they're receiving. So are they always going to be servants in their own country? Is this how we're going to treat them? You know, throughout they're never going to be able to take their own stand, and that's what I was kind of like feeling quite passionate about. And then when I see that, even with the people that I know have really evolved in life, and then they still taking advantage of, you know, their servants in that kind of way, just made me feel like my heart goes out to you, because if you're putting if the accusations being put on you, it's just like, you know, we're getting a new servant. That's it. We have to be we have to be careful on our front we have to be careful. So you're already putting it in your head that that person's going to do, you know, create some kind of crime within, in your home, or something like that. Whether that person's come with a clean intention that I'm coming there to, you know, do my job and that's it, but you've already put it in there that I don't trust you. You know you're gonna come and do something. You know you're I don't trust to leave my home to you, and that's it. That's that barrier that we've already just put between us, that if we're gonna have someone in our home, we have to be careful to just keep anything there, and I feel like that's just there with everyone.

Lata Desai 18:29
If your observations, you observe all these things since you are brought up in Britain, so now you are questioning the situation back in Africa about why people, if you were stuck in Mombasa, you probably might have been the same.

Pritee Varsani 18:49
That's it. So if I was born and brought up, and if I was raised on that in Kenya, then of course, my mindset would be according to what I see there, and it will be. Just be like, Okay, this is the norm. This is how it works. However, because I'm born and brought up in the UK, in a different country, and then going there, going back and forth there, and then seeing because I remember going there in the mid 90s, I remember driving somewhere and our tyres being stuck in a traffic, and our tyres being stolen, just being stuck in traffic. And you know, the fact that someone had the nerve to actually just come and just take our tyres out was just like, wow, that's so random. Who did that? Who would even think to do that? But yes, you know that actually happened. But then after that, you know, knowing that someone was held at gunpoint, one of my own family members were held at gunpoint because, you know, they do

anything and everything to get money out of you, and, you know, something out of you, because that's what they want. Yeah, you experience that, but then you go again, and it's things are different. Now there's more jobs out there for people, you know. it's Nairobi has evolved massively, like from where I, you know, 10 years ago, when I went to when I went a few months ago, it's completely different, like the bridges that have been created, and, you know, the more work opportunities there are. So you feel like it's more safer being out walking around. You feel that, yes, you get told that Be careful with your phones, be careful with your money and so on forth. But I went for my walks, I did things, and I felt like, okay, you know what? I'm not I feel like you're putting, you know, the people from there, you're putting that in my head, because when I'm going out and doing these things, I'm not feeling that fear. I'm not feeling that some you know that I need to what look around me, and that's more so because you've allowed these people to go out there and work by giving them more work opportunities. And I don't know if that's from, you know, from China, when now, it's literally take, you know, they've gone there and kind of, like, started, you know, created these bridges, and invested quite a lot in Nairobi now, in Kenya. So I don't know. It's because they've given all these opportunities now, and with the Indians as well, like, you know, creating all these new businesses and so on that's given them more work. That's keeping them away from creating all these crimes. I guess,

Lata Desai 21:28
a passionate desire to understand about your roots, and you went to India and and stayed there. And did you feel the same with the youngsters in Africa? Did they have or did they become more cosmopolitan or more westernised,

Pritee Varsani 21:42
as in the Indians?

Lata Desai 21:46
the Indians

Lata Desai 21:46
your your family or your far around you, did they, did they have this burning desire to want to learn about India.?

Pritee Varsani 21:56
from what I felt when I went to India, going to meet, meeting all these people who had so much passion towards just even wanting to know me and get you know, wanting to go into, let's just say, the culture with me. I didn't feel that with the younger generation in Africa, I felt that they were very westernised, who themselves. Gujarati wouldn't even be a language for them, to be honest with you, even Swahili is very little for them as well, because English is the main language for them, and that's what they're focusing on. So even when I was trying to speak to, I would say, my nieces and nephews. You know, the few kids that I was around tried to speak to them in Gujarati, because I'm very passionate about the Gujarati language and keeping it alive. Even when I tried to speak to them, they'll look at me like, why? What

language you speaking to me? And why are you speaking to me? You know, in Gujarati, why can't we speak in English? You're from London, so you should speak to me, you know, in English. But it was like, No, you should know this, you know, yeah, so I felt a very, a big difference with the younger generation from Africa to what I see in India is very, very different.

Lata Desai 23:20
It's funny how migration shapes us, isn't it? All these experiences of migration. Now I want to talk to you about I'm quite fascinated by your 'chhunddas', your tattoos, very Gujarati, very Kutchi tattoo. And then I'm also bit intrigued about your hairstyle. So where does your identity? How do you identify yourself as?

Pritee Varsani 23:49
So I love the Gujarati folk culture. My tattoo comes so it's Traajvaa. It's come from looking at my grandma and the older generation. So of course, they all did Traajvaa. However, my mum has the dots on her face as well. It means something. Each and every dot actually represents some kind of solar system, some kind of planets, and there's a story behind them. And growing up and seeing, of course, my grandma with the tattoos on her arms, it was very interesting for me, because I loved, I've grown up loving tattoos. And of course, I've done the whole, you know, let's get the needle and, you know, just with the machine, and do tattoos on my body and so on watching others, but when I did what I've done on my neck, was something that just connected me to my grandparent and my grandma and my relatives, and it was just like I want to do it in the way that they did it, which was hand poked, because that's the memory that I want. So I actually got that done in the UK, and I found a tattooist in London who does it in the traditional way, where she hand pokes, and it took us six hours to do what I've done, very painful, but I'm glad I got it done, because I understood what my grandparents went through at that time to get these kind of tattoos done. And I love it. And because I'm I'm an artist, and I like to stand out in different ways. So me creating this kind of hairstyle, or every time I like to do something different, even when it comes to wearing clothing wise. And so, I mean, there's a lot of inspiration support from Mira. But I like to do things where I feel like, you know, I want to stand out in in a different way and just come out of the box, like, don't want to I don't want to be where everyone else is. I want to just be someone different, whether that's my singing style or whether that's my look style, I just want to be able to stand out in what I do and but whilst I'm standing out in what I do, I'm showing the Gujarati culture that it's not Gujarati culture. Gujarati music isn't the old thing that you listen to that, that, you know, the bhajans, that mentality of, oh, you know, Gujarati songs mean garba. Gujarati songs mean bhajans. No, you know, there could be a fun way to go into the whole Gujarati culture. And you can do all these things, but bring it in a different way. And I think that's what I'm trying to bring out. So when I do perform in Navratri, I wear Bagri. You know that it's not just men that can wear paagdi. We can wear paagdi. We can make it look cool. And we can just make Gujarati culture look really cool by just incorporating their textiles and their different styles to the western side of stuff and see how we can make it work. There's no limits to in terms of, no, this is Gujarati culture. No, how can we experiment with it? And that's what I want to do. I just want to experiment with it as

much as I can. So I know that a younger generation will look at it and be like, Oh, Gujarati culture is cool, and that's my main thing. I just want it to be a cool culture. We like to experiment with different types of clothing and so on. It's about what feels right and what looks right, and it's just about combining the two together. Because I live in the UK. I am from here, but my heart is, of course, just goes to Gujarat all the time. And I, you know, I'm from Kutch, and I love the Kutchi culture. I love the textiles. I love everything about, not just Kutch but in Gujarat as a whole, like the kind of, you know, work we have within our clothing and so on. Jewellery wise, it's about how to then combine it with, you know, today's because I can't walk around in London with a Kutchi outfit like, you know, that's not something I can do in my day to day life. How can I incorporate it into my day to day life? And that's just what we like to do. So if it's like, if I, you know, if I can wear a bandhani scarf, for example, I will do that if I can, you know, go like, go find ajirakh material and turn that into a shirt, or add patches to my jeans. Then how am I incorporating it into my clothing where I'm still connecting with my roots and still connecting with my you know, that that style that I want to adapt and just bring it into the Western, the western side of me, and just making it look more cool.

Lata Desai 28:50
What triggered all your passion to go back home and finding the roots and the true roots?

Pritee Varsani 28:58
My journey has been very different, actually. I've been born and brought up here in the UK. I've not been exposed as much to our culture. It was only through my community events and the temple. So I would do my weekly trips to the to the Mandir, and we'll have our annual community event, and that's what I would go to, where I would dance and so on, but to learn about our culture and so on, I feel like because my parents themselves when they came into the country, they needed to work, work, work, work, to get by. So we didn't get to sit down and even understand about the roots of the culture. You'd get a few things from the grandparents, but it was a lot of religious stories. You know, this is the Ramayan, this is the Mahabharat and so on forth. So that's what I would learn more about. And it was just when I started, when actually later on in my life, I would say, somebody noticed, somebody actually pointed out to me that, you know what, Pritee, you actually have a good voice. You should do something with it. Where I never knew, because my parents never actually thought to send me to anything when it comes to arts or, you know, music or dance or anything. For them, it was just like academics, you know, school, and that's it. They were never exposed to it themselves. So they never thought that let me send you to, you know, to a music school or anything like that. And my parents don't come from any we don't have any musical background, you know. So they wouldn't think of it. And I didn't think of it either. And I think it was just when I turned 18 or 19, when some of somebody from work said to me, Pritee, you have a good voice. You should maybe just go for a voice check or something like that in the studios. And through connections I did, I went to a studio, and at that time, my Gujarati wasn't great, so it wasn't that I wanted to take the Gujarati route. I was more into the Bollywood side of the stuff. So it was Bollywood music and Bollywood, you know, songs, that's what I wanted to take forward. So I thought, Okay, fine. And when I went to the studio

and I did a vocal check, the guy there actually said to me, you got a very good voice, and you can go forward in this and again, at that time, I had no idea how things work, because I didn't even know the Sa of music. And then for me at that time, was like, No, I want to go to India. And I think I should at least go and learn the basics of music, or basics of what I'm trying to get into here, all of a sudden. And that's when I went to Mumbai, thinking I'm going to go into the Bollywood side of stuff. It was only up until when I went there and through a big celebrity, Falguni Pathak, she heard me sing in a bhajan. She did a bhajan performance, and she called me up on stage through a friend of mine, and asked me to sing with her. And at that time, because she was singing bhajans, and I couldn't sing bhajans because that wasn't the route I was taking. And I said to her that I don't know if I'm gonna sing it correctly, because I don't even know these words. And she said to me, I'm gonna sing a dhoon. You just follow me, because I've called you up on stage now, you just follow me and just just sing. So I said, Okay, fine. And I did that. She sang a dhoon, and I sang after her. And then she said to me, after I finished, she said, just make sure you just wait. After the show, I want to speak to you. And of course, I was like panicking, thinking, oh my god, Falguni Pathak wants to talk to me. I wonder what she will say to me. I was actually panicking. So after the show, I spoke to her, and she said to me, what is your what's your plans? What do you want to do? And I said, I want to be a Bollywood singer, you know? And she was like, No, I don't think you should take that route. What I feel is, what we're losing, is the Gujarati culture, the Gujarati music. If everyone wants to go into Bollywood, there's so many kids that are just rising to go into Bollywood. Everyone wants to get into that. But who wants to do Gujarati if that? If we don't take that stand from now, then we're going to lose our Gujarati culture. We're going to lose our Gujarati music. We need people to do that. When she said that to me, I thought, You know what? I know nothing about Gujarati music. I know nothing , don't even know the language properly. I'm going to go and do this. And that's when I went to Rajkot and my music teacher, Lalita Ben Goradhara. She my dad, of course, knew her because he went to her bhajans and so on. So through that connection, I went to her house, and I was, of course, speaking to her in my Gujarati that I thought was the correct Gujarati, which was a Gujarati Kutchi Swahil , English. And she looked she was looking at me like, I don't know what language you're speaking to me in. And I actually felt like, Oh, my goodness, all my life I've been speaking a language that is incorrect. That is what we would call Khichdi. That's what I've done. I've made a Khichdi of a language, and I'm trying to speak that language to a person who actually knows Gujarati. And she said, No, we're going to do everything from the start now, and that's when she wrote K, Kha , Gha - the Gujarati alphabets for me, and then she gave me newspapers. She said, now you're going to start reading these newspapers, and you're going to start learning the language. And that's when I started learning the language. I started going into she was because she's a Bhajan Sant Vani artist, her shows used to start from 10pm go on to 7am in the morning, pretty much every night. And if she's not performing at night, she would go into recording studios in the daytime. So she asked, she because I was living with her, she asked me to go with her to these performances and go to the studio, which I was happy to do. Wasn't really happy to go into the bhajans, because I could not stand the sound of the manjiras. For me, it was too loud by the ears. It was, it was piercing my ears. That's how I felt at that time. And so I went and I was there, literally, you can see me still, currently, you'll see those random YouTube videos where I'm sitting behind

her and I'm falling asleep in the back. But I still sat through those bhajans, not interested as much, not understanding what's going on here. But I still went, and I was like, Okay, let me I try understanding how she's sitting, how she's performing, how she's doing, how the music, how they, you know, how the they're combining as a, you know, as a group musicians, and so on. So I started doing all of that. Started looking at in a different way. It was only up until she asked me to go to Junagadh for the Shiv Ratri No Melo and I was told by other artists, like, Pritee, you don't want to go there, because all you're going to hear is Sant vani bhajans like daayros that's happening there, and it's, there's too many people, and I don't know if you want, you don't want to be around there. So everybody was putting me off. There's like, that's like, the worst place to, you know, go for me, not for them, but for me. So but that I tried to talk to my music teacher, and I tried to get myself out of that, and she was like, No, you're gonna come to it, and you're going to experience the Shivratri Melo, and you're going to experience that side. So I was like, Okay, fine. You know what? I can't argue with her. Now I'm going to have to go. And the first day I got there, as soon as I got there, it was five days. The moment I got there, my slippers broke, so five days I had to walk around with no slippers. And the first four days, it was really irritating for me, or getting really agitated because there were so many people, and people were just, you know, hitting into you and so on. And it was getting me really frustrated. It's like, why there's so much space around you? Why do they have to brush past you? And that's what kept happening. And so I was getting irritated, and it was only on the last night on the Shivaratri, on actual Shivaratri, I kid you not. I don't know what happened. The manjila sound that was so irritating for me became so sweet all of a sudden, was oh my gosh, like you sound so sweet all of a sudden. And the bhajans that I could not understand became like I could connect to it. And it was like a transformation that was happening, and I don't know what that was, and I still, from till date. I still can't put like what happened to me on that day, but that's what I wanted to get into. It's like, No, I want to do bhajans. I want to do Sant Vaani I want to do this is my culture. This is my roots. This is what's making me feel like. This is my home, you know, and I just want to do that. And coming back here singing those songs. Yes, that older generation will connect to them, but the next generation, how am I going to get them to connect to them? That's that was my challenge. Because, like, what I did, I went out to India and stayed there, you know, the first year I stayed there for one year like that, I've been staying there for eight to 10 years.

Pritee Varsani 38:47
I did that, but another person isn't going to be able to do that. But how can I bring that here in a way where it looks cool and it looks fun and you know that I want to know about my culture, I had to try adapting that lifestyle to this lifestyle. I'm bringing it both together, and that's what was the challenge for me. But it was a fun challenge, and in that challenge is being like, No, this is what we're going to do, and this is how we're going to make it fun, and this is how we're going to get the kids involved and the younger generation and anyone involved, and that's what it was for us to just make it cool.

Lata Desai 39:23
Tell me, how is this challenge manifesting now? Do you find people are attracted to your work and connecting with what you are trying to portray to them?

Rolf Killius 39:34
I guess you should first explain what she's doing nowadays.

Pritee Varsani 39:40
I feel from where we started, when it came to because I used to perform for Garba, you know, in different places. And I was always told Pritee you need to sing Bollywood songs to get the get the community engaged. And I was really against that, because it. Like it's Navratri. Why do we have to sing Bollywood songs during navrati? Why is it that those nine days in a year, we can't respect MA and just sing for Ma? You know, we should do that because that's her time. We can listen to Bollywood anytime with the I've got nothing against Bollywood. I listen to bollywood most of the times anyway, but for those Nine Nights, why can't we just dedicate and devote that time to ma? So it used to really frustrate me when I used to go and perform in different communities, and they used to tell me, that's the only way we will be able to engage with the crowd, is by singing Bollywood songs. However, because I was against it, I never did perform Bollywood songs. Yes, my co singers would perform Bollywood songs. But I would refuse to do that. For me, it was just traditional, and it was only up until when, you know, in 2013 when my cousin said to me, how would you want to do it? What's your goal? What's What how do you want to do? How would you where do you see yourself, basically, with the Gujarati culture and so on. And I said to him, when it comes to Navratri, I want to sing the garbas that we are supposed to be singing. I want to perform what we're supposed to be performing, and not feeling that we need to piggy bank offBollywood to get a community to come together. And he said, Okay, you tell me what you want, and I'll be there to support you. And that's when it was, yes, it was our first year of Navratri. It was a struggle for us because we organised our own Navratri the way we wanted, the way I wanted to do it, to bring in a group from India, because I wanted that traditional feel, the traditional connection. So it was like, Okay, let's let me try that and see how it portrays. And the thing about the way we work is, when we get booked out as artists, it's like, okay, fine, we're going to do what you want us to do, but when are we going to be able to do what we want to do? And that's when we created Red Lotus events. And it was like, No, this is where we're going to show what we want to do. And you come to our performance and see this, what how we portray our culture. Of course, in the beginning, we felt like, okay, the general, you know, the crowd were a lot more elderly at that time, just elderly in the beginning sometimes would, you know, like Navratri, going back to that, we started off with only 30 people in the audience, but it we didn't lose hope from that, because we know, like we did that, even though people were telling us, okay, Don't do it, because clearly it's not gonna work. Maybe we do need to do Bollywood. Maybe that is the way to get the crowd in. No, it's because people don't know about it, and we just need to just keep putting it out there that this is what we're doing. And we just need to make sure people feel that it's actually cool, it's actually fun to you know, hear our music and hear these traditional Gujarati songs. So we didn't come away from what we wanted to set off. Start off with. We're still doing that. From 2013 when we first started, gorba, to 2024 last year. Gorba, we're still doing the same songs. We haven't changed. We have not added any Bollywood influence. We've not added nothing to it. If anything, our audience have grown. They've become more younger. They would say

it themselves. Oh, you know that Prachin song that you've been singing this whole time? Why don't you sing it this garba? Can you sing? I'll get text messages from my cousin's sister, make sure you sing that old, you know, Gujarati Garbo song today, and so on. Which makes me feel proud, because that's the girl who goes to clubs and who goes out partying and who goes to her Bollywood nights, and who has that lifestyle, but when she comes to garba, she wants to listen to that traditional Garbo, and that's what makes me feel like, yes, you know, thank you. We're doing something right.

Lata Desai 44:04
Do you have any plan, future plans about how you can make this stick out to the next generation?

Speaker 1 44:12
I think Mira will be better at explaining this, but I will say wherever I go. So we're doing kids mentorships, and we're doing other events, like we've given a platform like Rangeelu Gujarat, and that's primarily for the next generation to feel that it's okay to be Gujarati. You know, we have all of these things, and for us as well, it's also a learning thing for us as well, because we're the more we're doing these kind of events, we're digging more deeper into our culture for us to actually pass on. And when it comes to the kids mentorship going on to that we've all grown up, kind of like going into kathas and, you know, going to mandirs and volunteering and being a part of the community in that way, and that's what gave us our space of knowing about our culture and knowing about the little that we could for those seven or nine days of Katha. You know, we go there and volunteer, and we got to be a part of our community, and that made us feel like, okay, that brought us closer to our culture. However, that was it. So we want to create that space where we want to offer that same thing back to the younger generation, where you come and you know you'll be mentored by the correct people in the departments. And if you want to be security, then you'd get the support from the security team. If you want to be a singer, you'd get support from the singing, you know, from the singers and the musicians and so on forth. There's a wide community that can support the next generation, and we want to do that, to pass that on, because they are the future, and they are the ones that are going to take this forward. So even by doing Rangeelu Gujarat and so on, is, yes, it's for our satisfaction as well, but it's also for the next generation to feel like, wow. This is our culture. This is our people, and this is something we want to just take forward

Rolf Killius 46:20
A question like, where do you really come from? Was that ever asked - this question?

Pritee Varsani 46:31
Sometimes I don't know where I belong. I love the fact that I'm British and I've adapted a very diverse culture here, but I also love that I've picked up so much of the Gujarati culture, and I've introduced that to myself and being born and brought up here, how I've adapted the two cultures together. I love that, because I can go to India, I can go to anywhere in the world. When, at the moment, I come back to the UK, I feel like I'm home, and that's because

there's so much to learn here in the UK from different people. And we work a lot with, like, just recently, we worked with an African culture for one of the shows that we just did a month ago, but learning their style and their music and their everything about them, and then adapting the Gujarati culture to that, but not just the Gujarati, but then the western side to that, and the Punjabi side to that, there was, there's so many different elements that we brought together, but we were only able to do that by being open within ourselves that, no, I'm not just a Gujarati, I'm not just a British I'm very open to adapt to everything. So, yeah,

Rolf Killius 48:01
You know, you know this country has also a colonial past, and actually, why your parents, grandparents had to move around was related to the colonial empire. Does it bother you, or does it, what is your take on that?

Pritee Varsani 48:16
I personally think it doesn't bother me, because it's very for me, it's very different now, for what they went my parents didn't go through those kind of challenges what they the others went through in Uganda. So I from hearing my parents' migration story, it hasn't I feel like it hasn't affected them for it to affect me.

Lata Desai 48:50
What do your parents think of you now that you are digging into becoming a folk singer and and you said that you were never exposed you, never was sent to class or whatever

Rolf Killius 49:04
And also in relation to the academic thing, what they wanted?

Pritee Varsani 49:11
My dad passed away, of course, 15 years ago. But when both of them, my parents, both my parents, when I told them, I want to do music, it wasn't something like they thought was a thing. They thought music is a side hobby, you know, you don't, we don't have anything to do with music within the family, like, how you're going to get by? Because, I think for them, was like, No, you know, the normal thing is becoming a doctor or becoming a lawyer or an accountant or working in a bank and so on, and I think that's what my mum's dreams were for me, whereas my dad was very chilled, it was very much like, it doesn't matter, you'll still be my favourite. You know, you can do whatever you want in life, but I won't love you any less. And when I told my dad that I want to do, I do want to go and sing in India. Yes, for him, there was, of course, that side, that one concern that, how am I going to live without you knowing that I'm going to come home and not have you in the house? That was one thing that was his, No, I don't think you should go. But then he also felt like, No, you know, you've just found something that you want, you want to explore. My support is there so you go and do what you feel is right? If it doesn't work, it doesn't work, not in those words, because he was, he wasn't very vocal on how he felt, but looking into it, I know this is how he was trying to push me into it. And my mum, at that time, she didn't really have much of a voice. What my dad said is what mattered. So she didn't really have much to say. And when I did go there and

do what I went, you know, did what I went to do. And when I came back with my first album, which was released by T series, of course, my dad was that proud dad who went everywhere because he was a plumber by profession. And whenever he would go and do plumbing at someone's house, he would take my CD there and be like, Oh, look, this is my daughter. You know she's I've only got one CD here, but we'll have to watch that like, We'll watch it together. And then he'll make every household that he goes to watch that one CD. And then he'll end up leaving it there's but really, in his van, he would have a box of my CDs, but he'll tell everyone that he's only got one CD, so he makes sure that he sits there with them, watching my whole album. But that was just him being so proud. He would never tell me, but he was my biggest supporter, and he pushed me so much out there in the community, telling everyone that, oh, my daughter sings. My daughter sings. So if my mum, before used to feel like, No, you still need to get you this is not a job. You still need to go into something. But after dad passed away, I feel like she relaxed more and she was like, You know what? Just do what you're doing. Because I think when she started seeing that I was doing my own events, and I started organising these things, and for her, it felt like when people were telling her that, wow, you know, your daughter's done something really amazing here and this, you know, when she used to hear about it outside, that used to make her feel like, oh, people are talking about her in a very positive way. And when I was doing performances, and when I would perform on stage, and people would come to her and be like, oh, you know your daughter, if they will say something like compliment me or anything, it made her feel proud that okay, you know what she's doing the right thing. She's done the right thing. So, yeah, so that had to change. They had to turn but I think for them, they had to find that, because they never knew about it. She never knew that these kind of things exist. So it was something that she needed to learn in her time, and feel like, okay, well, maybe this is a career, and maybe this is a job, but maybe there is a life here, and it's not just the nine to five, you know, going into an office and doing all accounts and so on. Maybe there is a different lifestyle as well, but she had to understand that through my journey and and I think now she's finally started to get to terms to it. She also promotes me a lot like, Yeah, her support. Honestly, I would not be able to do it if her support wasn't there.

Lata Desai 53:46

Lata Desai 53:49
Can I put you on the spot? Can you sing a little piece for us?

Pritee Varsani 53:53

Pritee Varsani 53:53
Sings .....

Lata Desai 55:04
Fantastic.

Pritee Varsani 55:05
Thank you.

Lata Desai 55:06
And the words of that, because she's talking about, come to our land..Aapna malak ma' , you know, it's good, very apt,

Pritee Varsani 55:16
and there's only so much we can do to keep promoting it. But then it just looks like we're just itself. We're just promoting our own stuff constantly, constantly, but we need other people from outside to see it, to be like, can you come and do it here or but there has to be an audience for it as well. There is an audience, but that's the older generation audience, but we need to also to get that next generation as well, because then it's gone. I mean, I'm trying to train my niece up. She's a 12 year old, 13 year old now, and I started to get her into shows with me. She's got a beautiful voice, but because she's, of course, born and raised here, her thing is more towards the western side, but I give her that platform to perform with me on stage for my annual show that I do in January, and I started off with giving her the first song was ladki. I said, you sing ladki, and we'll both sing that together. But of course, now her voice is matured up. So I gave her another song last year and then another song this year. But however, for the kids mentorship that we've been doing for Navratri. I've been teaching her the prachin garbas, like Chapti bhari , Chokha and Ma Pawa Te Gadma and those kind of ones. And it's like, these are our songs. I want you to try tapping into I know you're into your western songs, which is fine, there's nothing wrong with it. But also know that these are our songs as well, so I'm trying to somehow get them in there, but then trying, from her Western influence and from her Western coaching, how she can then implement that Western style to that I want her to come up with that creativity, rather than me saying, No, I want you to do it like this. You've now seen best of both. How are you going to merge the two together? Is what the challenge I want her to and she's a fresh mind. She's a 13 year old. So how are you going to adapt to that? How are you going to work with that? I don't want to tell you this is how you should adapt to it, but I want to see what they can come that generation can come with. And even like working here, to start making songs as well. So we've created, we're the first in the UK to create British Gujarati, you know, strong songs, and we've in the beginning, our first song that we released here in the UK was in 2016 we just tried it out and thought, let's see how the audience received this. And it actually was received quite well. So, and then we did that. And then, going forward, every year, we started releasing a song. And then there was one year that we did a song called zapza, yeah, which wasn't a, which comes from, it comes from a Garbo from we found we heard it in, you know, in Baroda, and we were like, how can we make it, you know, turn it into something different, where people play in the clubs, for example, and we changed the whole style around and date till date, people actually playing that in the clubs. So it's a proud moment that a Gujarati song is now being played in a club. So we had to, you know, we had to turn that around. And, you know, just recent, last year before I worked with one of my other friends, and we said, how, you know, because there's no boundaries to a Gujarat song, we can't just say, okay, Gujarati song should only be released during Navratri time, because then it's only going to be related to, you know, garbas.

How can we release it later on, in a different time to Navratri? And how can we make it sound different where it's not about God, you know, let's create something different. And we did. We sat together and we put a whole theme together that, why can't we just talk about our day to day lives? Why can't we because that's what Gujarati Folk is. Gujarati folk songs are about your day to day lives. They're talking about them being in the villages and, you know, either doing something like some homework or, you know, the husband going to work and the wife telling the husband not to go to work. That's what the Gujarati folk songs are about. There's no religious connections there. So why do we have to add a religious connection here? Why can't we just talk about our day to day life and make it more interesting for the, you know, the new generation, next generation, and that's what we worked on. And we spoke to a music producer, and we added Afro beats to it, and we made it about friendship, that it doesn't have to be about love. Doesn't have to be about, you know, the girl loves the boy, and, you know, there's a romantic connection here. Why can't it be about us as friends? This is real. We are really good friends. Let's just talk about us and us enjoying ourselves. And that's what we did, and we made a video to it, and it just, you. My nephew who listens to like heavy metal stuff and trap music, and you know that kind of song, who does not love Bollywood songs, who does not love Gujarati songs, he listened to that. He goes, this is my framework Gujarati song. So we tapped into a different Gujarati there, the fact that he heard it. He goes, I love this. This is so cool. But it's like no gujarati song is not just religious. It's not just you know, about relationships and love and blah, blah, blah. It could be about anything, but it's how we can make it work, and it's about just enjoying and adapting to it. That's all it is.