

Interviewee: Saaj Raja

Interviewers: Lata Desai & Rolf Killius

Interviewed on 26/02/2025

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Saaj Raja, an actor, writer, dancer, and presenter, discusses his dual identity as Saajan Raja and Saaj, rooted in his Gujarati heritage. He recounts his upbringing in Crawley, UK, and the cultural and social challenges faced by his parents, who migrated from Uganda. Saaj's journey includes his early passion for Bollywood dance, his struggle with cultural assimilation, and his eventual embrace of his roots. He reflects on his spiritual journey, influenced by a monk in Hong Kong, and his commitment to sharing his cultural heritage through his art. Saaj emphasizes the importance of cultural cohesion and harmony in today's diverse world.

Action Items

- Explore his Ugandan roots and visit Uganda.
- Continue to share his story and cultural experiences through his work as an artist.
- Foster greater cohesion and harmony in society by celebrating cross-cultural similarities and shared struggles.

Outline

Saj Raja's Dual Identity and Cultural Background

- Saaj Raja introduces himself as an actor, writer, dancer, and presenter, known as Saaj Raja in his personal life.

- He explains his Gujarati heritage, born and raised in Crawley, UK, with a large South Asian community.
- Saaj describes his dual life growing up, being the only brown child in school during the week and part of a large South Asian community on weekends.
- His parents, born in Uganda, were displaced during the Idi Amin exodus and moved to the UK via India, facing challenges and missed opportunities.

Parents' Migration and Early Struggles

- Saaj's father moved to the UK at age nine, facing racism and poverty, while his mother came at age 21 and faced language and cultural barriers.
- His father had a difficult time integrating in Leicester, being chased by skinheads, while his mother had to take on adult responsibilities at a young age due to her mother's illness.
- Saaj's parents met in Crawley, where his father worked multiple jobs, and they had a love marriage, unusual for the time.
- Saaj's mother had to care for her unresponsive grandmother, and his father had to step in as a protective figure due to the age difference with his siblings.

Cultural Integration and Family Dynamics

- Saaj's parents worked hard as economic migrants, his father juggling three jobs and facing racism.
- Saaj's mother worked in Woolworths, struggling with language barriers, while his father worked in a paper company and hosted house parties.
- Saaj's parents met through mutual friends, and his father proposed after six months, leading to a love story.
- Saaj's parents discovered they were born in the same hospital in Uganda, a year apart, and shared a common heritage.

Bollywood Influence and Cultural Activities

- Saaj's parents were obsessed with Bollywood films and music, and Saj was exposed to it from a young age.
- Saaj performed Bollywood dances at local Diwali shows and melas, influenced by his parents and community.
- His father saw his rhythm and put him on stage at age four, leading to a lifelong passion for dance.
- Saaj's parents were active in the local NAI community, performing dances and plays, and Saj participated in these activities.

Navigating Dual Identity and Cultural Biases

- Lata Desai asks Saaj about the impact of his dual identity, growing up with cultural biases and conditioning.
- Saaj felt pressure to fit in at school and was reprimanded for not keeping cultural balance, being called "Doria" for acting white.
- He faced racism in the playground, being called "Paki," and felt embarrassed to speak Gujarati, which was his first language.

- Saaj's mother fought to preserve their Gujarati heritage, and Saaj took Gujarati classes as a teenager.

Struggles with Identity and Cultural Expectations

- Saaj discusses the pressure to succeed in a certain way within his community, with expectations of academic success.
- He initially wanted to pursue a career in Bollywood but was advised to study politics, leading to a degree in international relations.
- Saaj worked as a journalist and later moved to Hong Kong for a job at JP Morgan, but found it unfulfilling and began a path of self-destruction.
- A meeting with a monk in Hong Kong led to a spiritual awakening and a period of introspection, leading Saj to leave his job and embark on a journey of self-discovery.

Spiritual Journey and Personal Transformation

- Saaj's meeting with the monk in Hong Kong was a catalyst for his spiritual journey, leading him to question his life and identity.
- He embarked on a journey of soul-searching, including a 10-day Vipassana meditation and a car accident in India.
- Saaj spent a month in an Ayurvedic retreat in rural Gujarat, losing weight and undergoing a physical and mental transformation.
- He began to read the Bhagavad Gita and joined a sangha, finding a new appreciation for Vedic texts and spiritual practices.

Reconnecting with Cultural Roots and Identity

- Saaj's spiritual journey led him to reconnect with his cultural roots, embracing elements of his heritage that were previously forced upon him.
- He began to read the Bhagavad Gita with friends from his community, finding personal relevance in the text.
- Saaj's interest in Vedic texts and spirituality led him to run with elements of his identity, even becoming more knowledgeable about the Bhagavad Gita than some of his family members.
- He emphasizes the importance of preserving and celebrating cultural heritage while adapting to modern times.

Artistic Career and Cultural Responsibility

- Saaj discusses his open-minded approach to his acting career, playing roles that challenge and push boundaries.
- He has played roles that are not traditionally South Asian, such as a Sikh priest in a short film about a man struggling with his sexuality.
- Saaj emphasizes the importance of artists sharing their culture in a way that resonates with people and breaks ceilings.
- He sees his role as an artist as a responsibility to tell stories that counteract fear and promote cohesion and harmony.

Future Vision and Cultural Cohesion

- Saaj wishes for a greater sense of cohesion and harmony in society, counteracting the divisive narratives in the media.
- He believes in the importance of celebrating shared struggles and cultural similarities, promoting a vision of cross-cultural understanding.
- Saaj hosts a podcast called "Wisdom Talks," which brings together people from different backgrounds for philosophical and spiritual conversations.
- He sees artists and human beings as having a responsibility to share and celebrate their culture, promoting a more inclusive and truthful narrative.

FULL TRANSCRIPT

Saaj Raja 00:13

So my name is Saaj. It's interesting that question even to start with, because I kind of have two names. So my full name, my real name is Saajan, Saajan Raja, and I'm an actor, writer, dancer, presenter. So I'm a creative but my stage name, but also another part of my identity is Saaj, so I'm also Saaj Raja, and I'm actually more widely known as Saaj Raja, the people who I grew up with in my family, my parents, my uncles and aunties will call me Saajan, very affectionately. Or my friends from school would call me Saajan. So even if you ask me to introduce myself, it really depends on what room I'm in or who I'm around, how that answer would come out, because day to day, it would actually just be Saaj I'm Saaj, yeah, I have Gujarati heritage, both my mother and father. I was born and raised in Crawley in the UK and West Sussex. And Crawley has a very large South Asian community, and a large number of my community members live in Crawley and settled in Crawley from India, Uganda. So I'm from a community called the Naayee community. So that's known as we're known as the barbers. So the job, or the vocation that was assigned to our community was barbers. And I was lucky. I was really fortunate to grow up in an environment, a community environment, where I almost lived these two lives, because I grew up in a part of Crawley, which was called Maidenbower, and my family was were one of the first South Asian families in that neighbourhood. So my day to day experiences and my weekend experiences were very different, because during the day, I was the only brown child in my school, in my year group, one of the only brown kids. And then on the weekend, I'd be going to a wedding at the local leisure centre with like five 600 other people from my community and South Asians. So I was almost living this dual life. And my parents came to the UK at different stages in their life. So my dad came to the UK when he was nine, and my mother came to the UK when she was 21 my dad came to Leicester, so there's a huge Gujarati population in Leicester, and my mum came directly to Crawley, and their story is quite interesting. It's, I don't know whether to start with, with where, where they come into the picture, or mine growing up, so I might go off in a different tangent. But my parents were born in Uganda, and they came to the UK via India, but they were displaced and separated from their families. So my dad, after my dad was born, both my parents were affected by the exodus in 72 Idi Amin, but my grandfather, paternal grandfather, stayed behind in Uganda to see close things off. He owned a, I think, in mechanics store or a shop there. So my dad and my and my grandmother were kind of their own separate entity. And so my dad spent his childhood years in India without his father. And then my grandfather, then paternal grandfather, then moved to the UK, which is what I think a lot of male South Asians did at the time. They moved to the UK first to set things up before bringing the family over. And so my dad came to the UK at the age of nine with my grandmother, whilst my grandfather was already setting setting things up there. There's a lot of talk I hear in my family, like of missed opportunities, because there are a number of very wealthy Gujarati families in Leicester who came in early they set up working in factories and those kinds of things. And I think my grandfather may have missed paternal grandfather may have missed an opportunity of some sort there, because I think they my dad and my my Ba

and Dada, my grandmother and grandfather lived in poverty and great difficulty in those times in the I think it was, would have been the late 70s. Yeah, late 70s, early 80s. And my dad had a very difficult time at school, integrating from being brought up in a kind of very small village environment to being put into a school in Leicester, where he still recounts stories and tells me, he doesn't talk about it very much, but he was chased by skinheads in the park. That kind of experience was very, very prevalent for him. So he had a chequered past in Leicester. My mum had a very different experience. She grew up and fully went to school and college in Ahmedabad in India, and she she graduated in, I think, she did accounting and finance at the University in Ahmedabad. And so she came to the UK and came to Crawley, and it was a different struggle for her, because she had to learn the language and assimilate to the culture in a different way. My dad came my dad moved down to Crawley at the age of 18. So he's one of he's one of five, I think one of five in the family. So he comes from a large a large family, and at that moment, there was a lot of migration happening to Crawley because of Gatwick Airport. The combination of Gatwick Airport being created created a lot of jobs for people. So my dad took up a job at the airport. He had two or three jobs catering. A lot of people worked in catering in Crawley, and he met my mother in Crawley, and it was a love marriage, which was unusual for the time, because arranged marriages were the thing on my mom's side, my aunt, my masi, she, she was, she was arranged in a marriage from a very young age. So my mum is one of three siblings, so she has a younger brother and an older sister, and her older sister was married very young, I'd say probably 18 or 19, maybe yeah, late teens, early 20s, and so they moved to the UK a lot earlier. My mom had a very difficult upbringing, because while she was growing up in India, her mother had was diagnosed with motor neuron disease when my mom was only 16 years old. So now my mom had to play the role of her, had to play the role of the wife, the female, the lead female in the household. From, from a young age, from a teenage age, where people would come over to the house in the community to eat, and it would be on my mum after school to cook for people. So she was burdened with that responsibility from from a very young age, yeah. So they both grew up in difficult, difficult environments and difficult settings. My dad had to play a very protective role and almost play like a father figure role. The difference of age between him and the youngest sibling in this in our in our family is 18 years. So my, by some way, my dad is the eldest sibling, and there were, there were troubles between my paternal grandmother and grandfather. There was, there was, you know, physical abuse, those kinds of things. And so my dad had to step in from a very young age for that. So both my mother and father had difficult time growing up, I think, and yet they still had to work economic migrants coming to the UK, they had to work extremely hard. Three jobs my dad was juggling, and one of my dad's uncles called him down, called him down to Crawley and said, 'Shashi, there's a lot of opportunity here for you. You know, you're kind of, you might languish a bit in Leicester. There's work here'. So my dad was renting a room from his uncle's house. I think he might have been paying him 50 to 100 pounds a month, maybe, and that's a lot, a lot of money at that time. And I think my dad had a bicycle, and so he would cycle between jobs and babysit his nephews and work, working extremely, extremely hard, and at the same time facing this institutional, and not just institution, at the time, this racism. My mother, I think, when she came to the UK, by that point, her, my grandmother's motor neuron disease had developed to

the extent where she needed care and she was not very responsive, and she was in a wheelchair. And that was my mother's side of the family were taken in by an aunt who had already established themselves in Crawley. So they were living with this aunt of mine, and I remember my mum telling me stories of her working in Woolworths and people asking her for stocks to check the stock or if anything was where to find something. And the only thing she'd learnt or memorise at that time was a 'Sorry, not in stock' because she couldn't speak English properly. Okay, so she memorised these certain phrases, and where the Woolworth is on the high street in Crawley. It doesn't exist anymore, but there was a an office opposite, and I think there was, it was a paper company, and my dad worked for a company which manufactured paper, was one of his jobs. So he worked opposite this Woolworth, and there's a bit of a love story here between my mom and dad, because my dad happened to be best friends and close friends with a cousin of my mother's. So he used to, he used to host these house parties. And so one of these house parties, these fateful evenings, this cousin of my mother said, ' Oh, hey to my dad. Oh, Shashi, this is my cousin. She's just come from India'. And my dad, you know, fell in love with her and was besotted, besotted by her. And they used to begin hanging out with each other. And when my mom would come out of this Woolworths, my dad would wave at her from the window of his office. And they started taking their lunch breaks together and and they tell me the story of they were on, they were there was they were at a dance, or of some sort together. And my dad said to her, I think George Michael or something was playing. My dad said to her, 'Do you want to be my partner?' And my mom said, 'Dance partner?' . And he said, 'No, life partner'. You know..And that was after six months or so. Pretty soon, my my maternal grandfather, his name's Govind, would start getting these phone calls from members of the community saying, ' Do you know that your daughter is hanging around with Shashi, like, so and so, and he's so and so's daughter. He's so and so's son, and they're holding hands in town,'.you know, like, like, the the whispers that were going around, it was scandalous, because this thing was not the time, wasn't the done thing at the time. So my mother and father had this kind of love story. And when my grandfather my my grandparents in Leicester had no idea of what was going on, but my when my grandfather in Crawley got to know, yeah, they they kind of, you know, made it official. At some point, my dad proposed to my mom, and she made him wait for a long time before she you know, she agreed. But when, when they eventually got married and they had the the registry and they produced their birth certificates, they had this astonishing revelation where they discovered that they were both born in the same hospital in Uganda, yeah, but a year apart from each other. So there's a year, a year and a half difference between my mother and father, but they were born in the same hospital, from the same community, Naayee community, but and they had travelled from Uganda to India to the UK, and their stories of their paths having potentially crossed as children. So my maternal grandmother happens to be from the same village as my mum, mum's side of the family, so there's no relation, but they happen to be from the same village. So there's a story of my maternal grandmother going back to her her roots, her village, as a young lady, and take when my dad was very little, I'm bringing my dad along with with her. And there could have been a moment there where my mum and dad may have crossed paths as children. So they have this story, yeah, which is, you know, very love story. And that translates, I think, into their love

for... my parents were obsessed with and still are obsessed with Bollywood, Bollywood films, Bollywood music would always be playing in the house. And I remember, from a very young age, being taken in, being taken into that and taking to that myself, my parents would drive an hour, hour and a half to Croydon or Feltham to go and watch a film, a Bollywood film, and you think about it now, an hour and a half to go and sit for three hours in a cinema, to then drive an hour and a half back. It's like half a day's thing. But this was our this was a big part of our upbringing. Music was always playing. And my parents were also very active within our local Naayee community. So my grandfather, on my mom's side, Govid, he was, he was a community leader. He was a leader of the Naayee Samaj. We call it the community. And so my mum and dad would regularly dance and put on dances and plays called nataks at Diwali shows and melas, so at the local Diwali show every year, Priti and Shashi, my mom and dad would reenact these hit Bollywood dance numbers, the numbers of the year, you know. And they would do them in a group as well. So we'd have uncles and cousins and family friends, and they do they'd reenact these Bollywood hit numbers to the audiences. And for an audience who did the time, didn't have access to live theatre and those kinds of things, it was amazing. And the rehearsals would take place in my house. So as a young toddler, as a baby, I was very much made kind of susceptible to all of this rehearsal process and dancing and those kinds of things. And I took to that. As a child, I used to try and join in. I'd try and join in the middle of the rehearsals. And my dad saw that, and he saw something in in me, this kind of rhythm. So at the age of four, he put me on stage, he tied these handkerchiefs around my fingers, and I performed, probably to a room of about 300 people and and I never left the stage after that. Every year after that, I would perform at Diwali shows, perform at these melas, and people would love it. And at the same time, I'm going to watch Shahrukh Khan and Akshay Kumar on the big silver screen, and then at Diwali time I get to recreate their songs. It was like I was getting I was being enabled to emulate my heroes, my childhood heroes, and I was being cheered for it. So I think it was incredibly ... what's the word.. it was, it was very addictive for me. You know, I really took to it as a child.

Lata Desai 16:47
Can I ask you something? You say that five days a week you would be in a school where you were the only brown face, and weekends you were doing all this Bollywood dancing and whatever. How did that affect you? Did you feel kind of lost between two worlds and you could not relate to one or the other? Or

Saaj Raja 17:12
Yeah, I would say that having this intersectional dual identity, looking back on it now, I can add these labels or terms to it, but at the time, I didn't know what what it was, and there were certain things that I was told within my home that reinforced certain biases, cultural biases, and also certain conditionings. So I was now spending more time at school where I really, really wanted to fit into a group of children, and a social group in which being accepted was like oxygen, you know, and so to adapt to that was very important and be accepted within those circles, My need for validation was was super high. So I think there was definitely moments of crisis in that, in discovering that, and also moments of being reprimanded for not

keeping that balance. So if I behaved in a certain way, perhaps spoke back to my parents as a child, I was told that only they call it Dhodiya, which is, like, only white kids do that, you know, 'Why are you acting like a Dhodiyo?' Which means, like, why are you acting white? And I'm like, 'Well, I'm not. I'm just challenging authority, or I'm just behaving in I didn't like, I'm not adding colour to this behaviour here, but from a very young age, my behaviour was being coloured, you know, by my parents or by figures of authority within my life. And it was not unusual to be called a Paki in the playground. You know, those are words, whether they were used, you know, in jest, you know, it's hard for me to see or imagine those words being used in a way which are meant to cause harm, when it's being said by like a five year old kid in the playground, and they don't understand, and even we don't understand, the repercussions those kinds of words can have. And my mom would would very regularly call me a coconut, you know, very, very white on the inside, brown on the outside. And all of a sudden, it's interesting, because my mother tongue is Gujarati, and I was brought up speaking Gujarati, you could, essentially, you could effectively say it was probably, it is my first language, and yet I was speaking it less and less. And as a child, I became sort of more embarrassed and ashamed to speak Gujarati because it didn't seem cool to me. It didn't seem necessary to me and my mother really fought and struggled with that, because a large part of our identity is made up by this Gujarati heritage, which has travelled from continent to continent and must be preserved and protected.

Rolf Killius 20:20
Can you explain the difficulties with the other kids? What you remember? How did you feel like?

Saaj Raja 20:27
Looking back on it, I didn't realise that it was kind of a superpower of some sort that differentiated me from people,

Saaj Raja 20:38
because what I was like, like, go. I'm almost at a full circle moment in my life where I realised the things that I was ashamed and embarrassed about are the things that I actually want to celebrate now. And my dad used to, I think there were these awareness weeks or moments in school life. I don't know how it was instigated, but my dad would come into school, and I would perform Bollywood dances in the school assembly sometimes, or to my class from primary school to middle school. And I remember he'd come with the cassette, pop it in, pop the volume up. I'd have the handkerchiefs, and I'd do the performance, and everyone in the assembly would think it was really cool. And I was, I was on the fence about it, because I was like, Oh my God, what if everyone thinks I'm weird? And because this is I'm bringing a part of my outside identity into the school, and I don't realise that at the time, the teachers wanted to celebrate that. They wanted to show, you know, like they wanted to showcase that, which I think is amazing for that time. And now I talk to I still have a number of friends who I keep in touch with, childhood friends, and some of them tell me one of my best memories from school, or one of my first memories from school is you performing at

school assembly in year four. And I'm like, what? And it's interesting, because when I get to secondary school, the stakes are a lot higher. The bullies are a lot scarier, and the social anxiety as you enter your teenage years goes tenfold. And I remember kind of going into my shell a bit and wanting to protect that element of my identity, so much so to the extent where, ahead of year, I think I was in year 10, asked me to perform at the end of year assembly. And I avoided him. I avoided that teacher for like, a few weeks, and without it, I was too scared to say no, so I just hid and I wish I'd performed at that assembly. It's kind of a regret that I have. But my dance life was, it was becoming more than a hobby. I was at the age of we used to watch this talent show on TV called boogie woogie, and it was a famous Indian dance talent show, almost like India's Got Talent now, and they were coming to the UK, and this was at a time in my life where I began to struggle with my Bollywood dancing and my dance identity as a 12 year old boy. I began to think, maybe it's, why am I the only boy dancing? Maybe it's Is this something for girls? All of these questions, and I kind of went off my dancing a little bit. And my mum saw this advertisement for Boogie, Woogie coming to the UK, and she signed me up. She filled out the forms, sent them off, and I got to the final of this competition. Went through, like various rounds, regional rounds, all of this, initial auditions. And I didn't realise that my mum and dad wanted to celebrate this, you know, but it went into the local paper, the Crawley newspaper, and I remember the journalist came to our house, took photographs of me with my train tracks and my Bollywood trophies, sequined outfit, and he asked me this one question. He said, 'What? How would you feel if you won?' And I said, I was a big reader. I've always been a big reader. And I used this word which children wouldn't use at the time. I said, 'I'd be flabbergasted.' And that was the school headline. It wasn't the fact that I was a finalist in this really cool dance competition. It was the fact that I used the word 'flabbergasted'. And I remember kids in the corridor would just like, point and laugh and be like, flabbergasted, and they'd burst out laughing. And I was thinking, why did I say that word? And I translated that embarrassment and shame a little bit into like, Oh, they're making fun of me as a dancer. Like, this isn't what I'm doing. Is not that cool. So it then the separation really became like two elements, and part of my identity there was like, me. Like. Saajan at school, trying to fit in, trying to be cool. I went through that phase as a 16, 17, year old where skinny jeans, converses, hair across here, check shirt, waistcoat, skinny tie. Battle of the Bands I'm going to like listening to, rock and roll, trying to fit in. And then Bollywood dance classes on the weekend. Yeah, and my mum really did, played her part in trying to uphold and make sure that we know our roots. She tells us this. She told us this retrospectively, not at the time, but she became a Gujarati teacher in Crawley, so she found another mother, Indian mother, Gujarati mother, and they set up Gujarati classes. So on Friday evenings in Langley Green, they would teach Gujarati classes to packed room for the kids. A lot of them would be my friends from the community, and we had to take exams and take Gujarati lessons, and I can read and write Gujarati now, not so well because I don't practice it. My brother can read better than me, but we were able as teenagers to read, write and speak Gujarati, and that was a result of my mum being kind of like they have to learn, you know,

Lata Desai 26:23

Going back to your roots, how do you I and with all this wonderful exposure you had with your dance, how do you identify yourself?

Saaj Raja 26:37
That's a really, really powerful question, and it's a question that I'm still trying to extrapolate an answer from. It's interesting, I think. Before this interview even started, I said to we were talking, I was talking to Rolf about East Africa and Uganda, and I said, I still need to go back there. I'm still looking to go back to East Africa. I've never been to Uganda, and I've never thought about my heritage as being Ugandan, but my subconscious. And there's a part of me that says, Oh, you need to go back there. There's part of me that wants to go because so much of what defines me and how I came here, comes from that place, you know, and how I identify myself. I think I'm bringing to light more elements of myself that I perhaps, more elements of my roots and identity that I cast into the shadows, and I'm trying to bring them out now in a more interesting way, and trying to celebrate them, even when it comes to my spiritual practice and who I am as a person, I've gone through an incredible amount of change in the last 10 years, where I grew up in a Hindu family, and I shunned the religion as a teenager, and I still don't agree with how religion is used to to forward cultural ideas, and it's used as a cover for cultural conditioning, And I've kind of come to my own spiritual practice in an interesting way, where my mum and dad say, now they can't understand this new version, where they say, Oh, you read the Bhagavad Gita, and you're so spiritual. Yet you decide to act in a certain way. You choose to have a partner that doesn't align with our cultural views, but yet you read the Gita, so how I identify with my culture and my identities? I think it's always changing, and I think it will always continue to develop, but I'm moving that forward from a place of shame and a place of it's almost like switching channels to there's only one channel, and that channel gets to play like a, like a, like your favourite radio station. It can play songs from certain genres and certain eras at different times. And I think I'd like to associate my identity to that, that I'm so lucky that I get this blend, and that's what I would want to share, because I think how my parents identify with their culture, and my grandmother doesn't identify. It's interesting. My grandmother doesn't identify to our culture and identity in she identifies to the culture and identity in a more flexible and fluid way than my parents do, and I think because what they have been brought up with has been codified, and it's almost like this 19 is there. Elements of it, which are 1960s 1950s version of the culture that has been carried across different continents.

Lata Desai 30:10
So how has the British culture influenced you? Your identity?

Rolf Killius 30:18
Another question follow up to this, how do other people perceive you in respect to their identity?

Lata Desai 30:25

I don't other people perceive me. I think other people perceive my identity a lot with who I am as an artist, because in Crawley, you bump into someone in town and they'll still remember Diwali show performances and those kinds of things. They even remember my parents performing on stage. That's how formative like these are core memories that have been created. So it depends where I am and who I'm with how I'm perceived. Because there are different there are different elements of myself that were more prevalent at different chapters in my life, but right now, I think people, people identify, identify with me from a place of curiosity, I think, and also about they see me and I see, I see, I see myself as having a responsibility to share our culture in a way which is a way which resonates with people. Because I think there's, I think every generation has to break ceilings and break obstacles. For my for my grandparents generation, that was casteism, and for my parents generation, that was, I think, creating economic prosperity and success in in a country which was set up institutionally for them not to succeed. And now my responsibility is to tell the stories, to tell the stories of that past and tell the stories of the present, to exercise the demons from those from those experiences. I have a unique responsibility and opportunity to shed the shame through my work as an artist. Does it link you to taking only South Asian roles or South Asian dance? Or are you quite open minded about your acting career?

Speaker 1 32:51
I'm very, I'm very open minded about my acting career, and also open minded about the experiences, because I think being ostracised, being excluded, being cast out, being oppressed, are unfortunately universal human experiences, and their experiences which have been felt across the generations and between different diaspora. So I'm fortunate to exist in an ecosystem and an environment which invites artists from different walks of life to step into the shoes that they may not on the surface, feel or seem from certain perspectives, fit to inhibit. So I don't think it it's interesting when I started off, I think it's much more acceptable now to be a multi hyphenate artist than it perhaps was before in mainstream media. I mean, 15 20, years ago, you were either a TV or a film actor, or you are either a stage or a stage actor or a musical actor, those kinds of things. And I think I've been working full time as an artist for five years now, and my work has taken me on the radio. It's taken me on stage in the West End. It's taken me on stage for musicals and on film. And so those are different, those are different directions, but also those are different mediums and different forms. But I've played different roles too. I've played, for example, I was fortunate to be asked to play a role of a Sikh priest known as a Gyani, I'm in no way, Sikh, and it was for a short film about a Sikh man who's struggling with his sexuality and his identity, and he straddles this life between his exploring his his homosexuality and then going to the Gurdwara and the temple, which are places which are seen as they're seen as places of solace and shelter, but can also be seen as places of judgement, you know. And I had to play this Gyani, and I remember feeling like I like what I mean. I'm not in any way qualified to play this people study their whole lives to play, to not to be these people. But I just read as much of Guru Granth Sahib as I could. I consulted with other Sikhs. Some Sikhs actually felt uncomfortable with sharing information for me, with me, and guiding me because of the subject matter and whereas others were more forthcoming. So I think what a unique responsibility to be able to inhabit

those spaces. So I think, yeah, it's an interesting and interesting place to be. As an artist, you have to push those boundaries, or at least exist on those boundaries, and test that grey area.

Rolf Killius 36:06
Did you come across our opinion that people question you or asking you, are you foreign? Or are you? Yeah? Are you, where do you come from, or where do you really come from? Yeah,

Saaj Raja 36:21
yeah, that's a question. It's funny, because that question can be can take on so many different levels of subtlety. It can come from someone who's just genuinely curious, where are you from? Where do you I even ask that question to people you know, but that question can even be a little bit more insidious from people within your own community, or people from within your own certain diaspora. A Gujarati person can ask you where you're from, and you tell them where you're from, and they will ask you what your surname is because it's not enough information. And from your surname, they will ascertain a certain preconditioned social like hierarchical status within their mind, Oh, you are a Lohana, or you are a Lohana, or you are a Naayee. My grandfather faced a lot of this in Nakuru in Kenya and Uganda and India. My grandfather used to direct plays. He was a writer. He used to write poems, and he actually wrote for the local paper in Nakuru and the local college paper as well, and they had to protect his identity for the first six months when he was writing, because if anyone came to find that these short poems and these editorials were being written by a Naayee, a barber, it wouldn't be allowed. And I was told it's funny, I actually have a recording of my grandfather talking about his life in Nakuru, which he's no longer with us. I'm so fortunate and glad that I asked his permission, and I just asked him questions for half an hour, and I wish I'd asked him questions for an hour, because he speaks about his time in Nakuru and how even if you touched a Patel friend's groceries, they're called shaakbhaji, they would have to chuck it because it's been touched by a lower caste and they can't eat that anymore. Some wouldn't even sit at the same table. And these are Indian Gujarati people. So where are you from? Can take so many different forms, but in my own personal experience, where are you from? Is is really interesting, because I always go back to my Ugandan roots. Whenever I tell people, I say, I'm I'm British. I'm British Indian, British, South Asian. But my parents were born in Uganda, but originally Gujarati, you know, so it's very multifaceted, but I'm in a place where I'm quite keen to share that information now,

39:10

Rolf Killius 39:10
Hmm... you are, apart from being an actor, musician, dancer, you're also trained at a professional way, more conventional way. And I experience, as a non South Asian that in the South Asian communities, there's a big pressure to be successful in a certain way. I mean, not being an actor, not being a musician, was this a conflict in your upbringing?

Saaj Raja 39:56
Yeah, yeah, it was. You. Yeah, it was for sure. I remember as a child going to houses, and any community house I was at, in the living room, I would always look up and above the fireplace or above the TV, there's a photograph of the eldest daughter or son holding a scroll in their hand their graduation University. And I think at a time for our parents were not afforded those opportunities, and it was seen as a mark of success to pass through that rite of passage. I think that attitude is starting to change now, but it's almost like Frankenstein a little bit. My parents hadn't quite realised the Bollywood monster they had played a huge part in creating. Because I very distinctly remember my parents asking me what I wanted to do as a as a job. I think I remember I must have been very young. I was a child sitting at the back of the car, and I said, I want to be on the silver screen. I remember them feeling slightly concerned by that, by that admission. At the same time, they were sacrificing their evenings, their weeknights, their weekends, to drive me to Ilford, to Croydon, to London. They drive me to classes. They tried to get me on stage as a model, as a child model, all the while coming up against a lot of barriers, because there were not opportunities for a person of my skin colour and my background to progress commercially as an artist. You know, in the late 90s, at mid 90s, early 2000s so I was I joined a Bollywood dance troupe at the age of 14, and I did my and my mom is ironically the one who kicked me out of bed that morning to attend that audition for the troupe. And I did my first international gig at the Turkey Turkish film festival at the age of 15, and I was on stage, and then I started doing gigs internationally, performing with a troupe whilst I was doing my GCSEs, and I was being told very quickly by people around me that I should seriously consider drama school, because I was set up for it. You know, I had been dancing for 10 years, and I had all of the signs were there. And I remember taking this to my parents. The first thing I said to them was, they should have been happy about it, but I want to move back to India. I want to move to Mumbai and try, try for Bollywood. And they were like, you're going to be eaten alive. You don't understand. It's very naive of you to think this. And then I said, Okay, I want to go to drama school. And they said, very concerned, because there were not that many people who looked like me on TV at the time, you know, and I had no safety net and wasn't fitting into the lawyer, doctor bracket, you know. So I said they wanted me to go to university. So I think that was the, really, the only viable option for me. So I said I'd study. They said, get a degree. And I said I'd study philosophy. And they said, No, get a proper degree. And that was not enough of a vocation for them, because it was still too wishy washy, you know. So I did politics. I studied international relations at Queen Mary University. I was very good at politics at A level. I had a brilliant teacher, and so I think I trans, transmuted my love for and inquisitiveness about people into politics, and studied at Queen Mary for three years, and I thought acting had become a pipe dream. Even then, my mother was willing to pay for my weekend acting classes in London, and me and my rebellious phase shunned it because I said you've denied me drama school, and you're giving me this weekend acting class. Not like I can't be an actor anymore. That ship has sailed for me. Very dramatic, and I seriously considered a career in politics. I was everything funny comes around full circle. My mom helped me write a letter to our local MP, a Labour MP, at the time called Laura Muffet, and asked if we could, if I could get some work experience with her. And she said, Oh yes, I remember you as a little boy

performing on Hawth, at the Hawth that was on stage for at the Diwali show. I came to watch your performance. And so she took me in, and I was an assistant to a Labour MP as a summer intern whilst doing my degree and working at Portcullis House in Westminster and watching David Cameron and David Brown, Prime Minister questions, and thinking, Cool, this is going to be my life now. And it didn't work out in that way. There was the financial crash. I graduated at a time of deep economic crisis the country I graduated in 2012 we had the London Olympics, but we were still reeling from the 2008 financial crisis. So there was a lack of jobs for graduates. So I fell into work as a journalist, and eventually that took me on a trip. I decided I wanted to live abroad. There was a bug in me that wanted to go and experience living in a different country, and so I went and lived in Hong Kong for four years, and I got the dream job, in my parents' eyes, which was a six month contract at a major investment bank. So I went and worked for JP Morgan in Hong Kong, and my parents fthought I was on the track. I mean, I thought it too, because by this point I'd I conditioned myself and changed the narrative in my mind that success, economic success is paramount to your happiness. It's very important. It's very important for your stability and your happiness. But I began to devour these books, like Liars, Poker and Wolf of Wall Street and all of these finance books, and I thought, I'm good with people. I could just be a trader on a trading floor and and fast forward four or five years. I was a stock broker in Hong Kong, not living a very happy life.

46:30
Lata Desai : Did you not continue?

Saaj Raja 46:36
I was thinking, I think I was in a path. I was in a path, path of self destruction in Hong Kong, I was living a very expat life, which was drinking very heavily. The world I was inhabiting was the wild west of finance. It was a very unregulated space. My boss would drink a lot of alcohol and some, and I was very, very heavily involved in all of that. And I got to a position and a point in my life where I think you get to a point where you run yourself into the ground, and only when you've scraped the bottom of that proverbial barrel, and you realise there's no you can't go lower, and you can't get out that you begin to question your surroundings. And I had a you could call it divine intervention, or Providence, or the universe stepping in, but I had a very unique experience in Hong Kong, which caused me to zoom out and take my whole life into consideration. So I worked on the 64th floor of the International Finance Centre, and there was a famous monk who was coming to give us a speak, a talk, a keynote at an investment bank a few floors down from me, and my friend at the time happened to be organising this event. So he said, there's this monk who's coming to talk at this bank. You should you should come. I think it would be really good for you. So okay, fine. So I came along to the event, and as soon as I arrived, I was handed a camera to take photographs. I'm not a photographer, so I take pictures, and the monk notices me and his keynote, if you closed your eyes and listened to it, you think you're witnessing a stand up comedy set, the monk was he had the whole room in the palm of his hand, and he was delivering wisdom through comedy. It was more powerful than a performance for me. I was kind of encapsulated by it.

And at the end, he calls me over. There's a throng of people around him, and he called me over to help, unmike him, so I'm unmicking him, and he starts asking me questions, where did you study? What's your name? Saajan from Queen Mary University, okay, international relations. And he looked at me, he said, we've met before. And I said, Yeah, I remember you. We've met. And turns out we had some mutual friends. He gives me his phone number. We exchange phone numbers, and he says, I'm giving a talk on Sunday at this at this local temple. You should come. So I decided to follow these breadcrumbs, and I accessed a folder in my laptop that said, Blackberry photos from my time at university, and I scroll and all the way at the bottom of this folder is a grainy photograph of me and this monk 10 years ago, prior to that meeting at Queen Mary University in London. And he remembered me, and at that time, I used to go to these Krishna consciousness, Krishna society, Krishna consciousness society events at university, because they were a guaranteed free Indian meal if you went for me and my flatmates. So we'd go and eat there. And he. He must have come to speak, and we, I don't know why, but we had a photograph taken together. Fast forward 10 years, and I showed him the photo, and he just laughed. And he and this guy, this monk, now has, his name is Gaur Gopal Das. He has millions of followers on social media. He's a globally renowned monk, best selling author. And I kind of poured my heart out to him about how lost I was. I said, I really understand and resonate these principles you speak of, but they're not conducive to my life right now. I drink, I'm doing all of the other paraphernalia. I eat meat. I'm not religious in any way. And he didn't judge me. He just like looked at me like loving eyes, no judgement, and told me to just keep following the breadcrumbs, taking the right association. And that caused me to really reflect on my life, where I was, where I was going, what I wanted to do, and it was like a catalyst for a great level of introspection. So it wasn't the reason why I left my job, but I definitely think it was like a catalyst that led to more questions being asked. So my mom couldn't believe it. She was like, You're friends with a monk. This monk, this guy, Gaur Gopal Das is friends with you. You eat meat, you drink alcohol, you're not and here I have other friends in my life who have kind of devoutly following this practice. And this monk had befriended me. He'd seen something in me, and he didn't judge me for this external so I went, I then began to have a bit of an identity crisis. And I thought, Okay, well, if this world isn't for me, then where do I want to be? And if I want to be an artist, then I can't answer these intrinsic questions about myself. I don't know who I am, I don't know why I am, I don't know where I'm going. So how can I, how can I really be an artist if I, if I don't know the answer, or at least some answers, to these questions? So I went down a rabbit hole, left my job in Hong Kong, pulled the plug on my life in Hong Kong. I mean, I was, I was, I was in a in a really bad place, you know, mentally, spiritually, physically, and I embarked on this journey of asking a lot of questions. My parents were, I think they were worried, but they were at the same time, my mom was just relieved that I was coming back, because I was only supposed to be gone for six months. Four years had passed, so the son was coming home, so I think that offset a lot of the worry, and I did a lot of soul searching. I did a 10 day Vipaasana, silent meditation. I went to India for was supposed to be a couple of weeks, and ended up being two or three months. I was involved in a car accident in India. My first night in India, one of my university friends fell asleep driving on the wheel of car, and it overturned onto oncoming traffic in Delhi, and we both survived. And I mean this being India, I wasn't taken

to a hospital. My friend had called up his friends, and they privately towed the car away. And the next day, I was attending a wedding, no checks or anything, and I had this delayed onset of whiplash. So my mom is a yoga teacher and Ayurvedic practitioner. I think that's tied up coming to our upbringing a lot as well the importance of Yoga and Ayurveda. And I spent a month in an Ayurvedic retreat in rural Gujarat, where not many people speak English, and they say that you should have a person with you because you may feel weak at certain points in this Panch karma treatment. So my mum had asked a second cousin of hers to come and spend the month with me. So his name was Hasmukh. So Hasmukh mama came to stay with me for a month, and I had this Dulux bedroom, and Dulux bedroom just means you have your own toilet and a desk and a rock hard mattress. And I spent a month in this place, and I it was a full circle moment for me, because all of the nurses and doctors were calling me Saajan Bhai it's like brother, very affectionate. And I was speaking to all of them in Gujarati, and I remember that moment like thanking my mum, calling her and thanking her for teaching me Gujarati, because in a place where I could have felt really alienated and lost, I was suddenly able to find my feet a bit. There's a very concentrated experience of eight months between meeting this monk, leaving my job, doing this 10 day meditation, having this car accident, and now suddenly spending the month of December in India with a family member who doesn't speak a word of English.

Lata Desai 55:31
How did they see you as a foreigner?

Saaj Raja 55:35
Yeah, yeah. I think they saw me. Yeah. They I think they saw me very affectionately, because I they could see me trying. And I think there were smirks by Gujaratis I get, I get the I get. I get the masculine, feminine wrong, and I might get the the tense, the tense wrong. And they just were very affectionate towards all of that. Very accommodating. I shaved my hair off as part of the experience. And to give you an idea of context, when I was a year, a year before I was about 84 kilos drinking 84 83 kilos in Hong Kong, and I'd gone down to about 63 64 kilos in India. It was a complete reset for my body. So I was going through a lot of physical, mental, spiritual transformation. And I came back to the UK to start my journey as an artist and a creative kind of like I'd shed, shed my old self, or shed, shed a skin of some sort. I was almost in a new body. Everything was reset because this Ayurvedic treatment it it's like getting an MOT done on your body. There's these key shots and daily massages, and you're eating no sugar for a month, and you're eating only from this herbal garden, which is grown on the premises, and you're living a very they call it satvik lifestyle. And that's kind of an extreme experience. So the last four or five years has been like a recalibration for me, because I don't think you can go your whole life living those kinds of experiences, but I became extremely, extremely interested and induced and curious about Vedic texts, spirituality, yoga, that that that path. I began to read the Bhagavad Gita. I joined a sangha, which is a group of a group of people who read this Bhagavad Gita together at the local temple. And the amazing thing about this Sangha was I was reading the Bhagavad Gita with a guy who I lived with at uni for two years, where we used to get drunk blindly at Ministry of

Sound, you know, on a weeknight. And here we were reading the Gita together and other boys who I'd seen and grown up in the community with, and here we were in our 20s, all becoming spiritually inquisitive at similar times. So being able to have the wisdom of this Gita reflected back to me through the lens and prisms of people who are also going through this identity exploration, who are also configuring what their intersectional and dual identities mean to them. Was amazing because I got, I think it got to, it really crystallised the wisdom for me in a way which was personal and relevant to my to my lived experience. It wasn't just this Sanskrit text anymore. It wasn't just playing these mantra, Mantra CD that my mom would play in the house, which used to get on my nerves because I couldn't understand it. It became this, this other, this other thing for me. So I have now gone on to inhabit and and run with elements of my identity that were forced on me as a not forced on me. Sorry, they were not you could, you could say imposed, or that I was taught or welcomed to experience. I think that's too flattering say welcome to experience. You had to go to the temple. And my uncle now will tell me if we have a discussion, you know, you probably know more about this than me when we talk about the Bhagavad Gita, and I don't agree with that term, but it just, it's, it's, it's meant to show that the level at which I've kind of embraced these Indian, Vedic, these elements of my culture, which many people would say are becoming diluted, or people do not, people no longer have an interest in anymore. So, yeah, I can't remember what the question even was coming

Rolf Killius 57:08
From here, it would be good to go in the future, what would you, What would you wish for yourself, for the society, your environment, just starting, what you do today, what you believe today. And yeah, I hope

Saaj Raja 1:00:38
I think, what I wish, what I wish for today's environment and for the culture, and for what I wish to express going forward is this sense of greater cohesion and harmony that we seem to be stepping away from it's interesting. Like I studied international relations 12 years ago now, and when I was studying, the major subjects were globalisation, and we were moving towards this global community, the power of the UN and the retraction of borders, and ever since then, we've had these moments of Brexit, Trump, of even what's going on politically in India. At the moment, there's a narrative of a secular narrative, a populist nationalist narrative, which I think, as great as it is to celebrate elements of culture, it also alienates minorities, and I would love to share a culture and a vision going forward of seeing, seeing, seeing our similarities in our shared struggle, you know, and also celebrating elements of culture, cross sectional culture. I think we have a unique opportunity now, at our time in existence, to be able to pick and choose what we want to celebrate amongst one another's cultures. I think we can we're in a we're in a moment where, whilst it may seem, we're separated politically, I think there's an interest as human beings around the world in wanting to seek truth, wanting to share truth, and also a resonance. I host a podcast called wisdom talks, and what's amazing about wisdom talks every week is, yes, we enter and go through philosophical and spiritual conversations. But I look at the people that are joining on these, on the zooms, and I look at

the people that are turning up at the one at the in person events in London, and it's a tapestry of life. It's people from different countries, different backgrounds, different walks of life. So I think we have responsibilities as artists, as human beings, to share and celebrate our culture and no longer exist in those shadows. So that's really what I'd want to share going forward. And I think, I think we have a responsibility to kind of counteract this overarching narrative that we're being fed in the media and it's creating fear. Yeah,