

Interviewee: Sejal Sehmi

Interviewer: Lata Desai / Rolf Killius

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SUMMARY

Sejal Sehmi, a technology professional and storyteller, shares her mixed heritage background, with her father being Sikh Punjabi and her mother Hindu Gujarati. She discusses her family's migration journey from Kenya to India and later to the UK, highlighting their struggles and resilience. Sejal recounts her own experiences of racism and cultural identity, including being mistaken for a maid in India and facing sexism in her tech career. She emphasizes the importance of family support, cultural integration, and her efforts to document and advocate for diverse narratives through her writing and filmmaking. Sejal Sehmi discussed her experiences with workplace misogyny and the importance of cultural sensitivity in global teams. She emphasized the need for empathy and proper name pronunciation in professional settings. Sejal aspired to eliminate expectations of behaviour and promote openness and self-education. She shared her personal journey of overcoming family expectations and mental health challenges, highlighting the importance of storytelling and cultural heritage. Sejal's grandmother's story and the community's mixed reactions to the Queen's death underscored the complexity of cultural identity and the ongoing need for empathy and understanding.

Outline

Sejal Sehmi's Background and Family History

- Sejal Sehmi introduces herself as a technology professional with a passion for storytelling, contributing to various publications and being the UK editor for Brown Girl magazine.
- She shares her mixed heritage background: her father is Sikh Punjabi from India, and her mother is Hindu Gujarati from Kenya.
- Sejal's maternal grandparents were born in Gujarat before partition, and her maternal grandmother was born around the time of India's independence, working in a factory and later moving to Kenya.
- Sejal's mother attended a Christian boarding school in Kenya, while her family faced mistreatment and had to start their lives over in India, leading to her mother's boarding school experience in Gujarat.

Parents' Experiences and Migration to the UK

- Sejal's father also attended a Christian school and had a similar focus on British history, learning about freedom fighters and partition experiences later in life.
- Sejal's father's uncle served in the Indian Army and was killed during partition, a story Sejal's father only recently learned about through a book by journalist Charu Puri.
- Sejal's parents met in Mumbai, and her mother moved to the UK alone to start a new life, initially staying with cousins and later living independently in Kingston.
- Sejal's father struggled with racism in his early jobs in the UK, facing passive-aggressive behavior and being asked to perform demeaning tasks, while her mother faced derogatory comments but maintained a strong sense of belonging.

Childhood Experiences and Cultural Identity

- Sejal was raised by a childminder and did not have much interaction with her grandparents, leading to a sense of cultural disconnect.
- Sejal attended a predominantly white school and faced incidents of racism, including being questioned about her identity by a school office worker and being excluded by a friend due to her skin color.
- Sejal's experiences at school and with her childminder normalized mixed-background families for her, but she still felt different and struggled with her sense of belonging.
- Sejal's grandmother played a significant role in her upbringing, and she became more fluent in her cultural language and traditions, attending cultural events and celebrations.

University and Personal Identity

- At university, Sejal encountered more South Asian students and faced questions about her identity, including her caste and cultural background.
- Sejal dated someone from a Sikh background, which led to discussions about her heritage and the expectations within her community.

- Sejal's experiences at university made her question her identity further, leading her to explore her cultural roots and the expectations placed on her by her community.
- Sejal's father encouraged her to learn about her culture but emphasized that it should not define her choices in life, including her future partner.

Professional Life and Challenges

- Sejal faced sexism and racism in her early career in financial services, including derogatory comments and assumptions about her background and marital status.
- She experienced a particularly difficult situation with a South Asian colleague who crossed professional boundaries and made inappropriate comments about her personal life.
- Sejal's experiences at work made her realize the importance of standing up for herself and not conforming to societal expectations.
- Sejal's work environment improved as more diverse individuals, including South Asians and women, rose to leadership positions, providing role models and a sense of belonging.

Personal Growth and Advocacy

- Sejal's experiences led her to become an advocate for women's rights and cultural identity, contributing to magazines and forming the UK team at Brown Girl magazine.
- She filmed her grandmother's journey and presented it at Rose Theatre, gaining a deeper understanding of her family's history and the challenges they faced.
- Sejal's work in storytelling and advocacy helped her find a sense of purpose and belonging, despite the challenges she faced.
- Sejal's experiences and advocacy efforts have shaped her identity and her approach to life, emphasizing the importance of resilience, independence, and self-acceptance.

Empowerment and Cultural Sensitivity in the Workplace

- Sejal discusses the importance of not coming across as too authoritative or bossy, emphasizing the need to make people feel empowered.
- She highlights the significance of acknowledging and accepting people's cultures, mentioning an incident where their boss asked if he pronounced their name correctly.
- Sejal notes that the practice of correctly pronouncing names has become common due to people speaking up about their identities.
- Sejal stresses the importance of respecting names and identities, stating that it should be done properly to give it the respect it deserves.

Future Aspirations and Societal Change

- Rolf Killius asks about Sejal's aspirations for the future, both personally and for society.
- Sejal expresses the ideal of not holding expectations of how people should behave towards them, advocating for openness and willingness to educate oneself.
- She emphasizes the importance of not assuming or holding expectations that others know about certain prejudices or biases.

- Sejal wants to be a voice of change, encouraging people to accept things as they are and to speak up if they want to change something.

Challenges with Family Expectations

- Lata Desai inquires if Speaker 1's immediate circle understands their thought processes.
- Sejal shares their struggle with their mother's expectations, which made them feel they were not enough, leading to a dark place mentally and physically.
- She mentions that their mother eventually supported them, and their sisters are now more understanding and open to conversations.
- Sejal notes that they have distanced themselves from some people whose thoughts and values are not parallel to theirs.

Uncovering Family Histories and Mental Health

- Sejal discusses the importance of uncovering family histories to learn from them and improve communication.
- She shares their father's reluctance to face certain demons and social stigmas, despite being open to discussing heritage and identity.
- She expresses disappointment over family members who did not support their grandmother's documentary but was encouraged by the support from friends.
- Sejal reflects on their grandmother's story, highlighting her resilience and the importance of understanding different perspectives.

Perception and Purpose of Historical Uncovering

- Sejal talks about the mixed opinions regarding the Queen's passing and its impact on South Asians.
- She explains their grandmother's indifference towards the Queen, seeing her as a matriarch who served her country despite her own lack of education.
- She emphasizes the importance of not forgetting past events, as they shape who we are and our resilience in dealing with prejudice and bias.
- Sejal acknowledges that while sessions on empathy and acceptance are important, core values and beliefs are deeply ingrained and may not change easily.

FULL TRANSCRIPT

Sejal Sehmi 00:13

My name is Sejal Sehmi. I'm from Southwest London. I'm the eldest of three siblings, and I was the first of the in the generation of my family to be born in this country to immigrant parents. I work in technology full time, but have a passion for storytelling, and I've been a contributing writer for publications like The Independent Asian Today, Red magazine and I'm the UK editor for Brown Girl magazine. I also have an interest in identity and heritage, and have done, tried to do some filmmaking in India, and also documented some of my family members journey here in the UK as well. I actually come from a mixed heritage background. My father is Sikh, Punjabi. He was born and raised in India in Pune, and his origins are from Punjab. And my mum is Hindu Gujarati, and she's actually raised in Kenya for most of her childhood. She moved over to India in her teens before she came to London. And my grandparents, I think I'm pretty sure both of my grandparents are from born in Gujarat, I believe, and my dad's side of the family his parents were in were born in Punjab, but I do feel like he has, if I recall correctly, he has some ancestors who were born in the part of Punjab that has now become Pakistan. So that's that's our heritage here. My maternal both my maternal grandparents, were obviously around pre partition, and they're from Gujarat. That's where they were were born. I don't know too much about my grandfather's history, because he died when I was very young, but my maternal grandmother, when I documented her story, she was born in a small village in in Gujarat, and I think she would have been around 12, 13, when India got its independence. So going to school was never an option for her at that age, she was working in a factory, and she used to come home and would help with the household chores. So she was aware of partition and she was aware of independence, but it didn't really have a direct impact on her as such, because I think by the age of 17, 18 she was married off to a man that she'd never met before. So she was in India, I think, until the late 40s, maybe early 50s, and then she moved over to Kenya, yeah, around like the early 50s, where most of the children were born. And then I think somewhere around the 60s, they moved back to they moved back to India. So they had a very good life in Kenya. My mom, who's the oldest of all of the children, she went to a Christian boarding school. However, my grandfather was a heart patient. He had multiple heart attacks, and his brothers were in India, and he used to send them money, as you do, as an older sibling, to to help them out. And he reached out to them to say, you know, we're coming back to India. I'm not feeling well. I could do with your support. And my family are coming with me, so they all moved over back to India, but my mom remained in Kenya. So education wasn't disrupted. And when they went to India, the complete opposite happened. They were completely mistreated by their family. They lost all their money, all their belongings, and they had to start their lives in Gujarat all over again, and I believe maybe just a few years after that is when my mum then moved to India to go to a boarding school in Gujarat, which she didn't enjoy at all. Think she was bullied because her English was a lot better than her peers, and her experience of India was directly related to how her family members were being treated by other family members. And so for her, Kenya was always home. She always felt like Kenya was, was going to be, would be home for her. And then my mom moved to Mumbai for college, think maybe like when she was 17. So she enjoyed Mumbai, where she met my dad, who was obviously a little bit more of a cosmopolitan city, but her heart was always in coming to London. She'd learned a lot about UK and its history boarding school in Kenya. Her cousins had already moved over here and for her, like, if there was going to be for her to create a better future for herself, she

always thought that one day, you know, she'd get out of India. If Kenya wasn't going to happen for her, then she'd come to London, which she did, at a very, very young age. And it was different. On my dad's side, it was but it was different. I didn't really I was very young when my grandmother died, and my grandfather, I met him a couple of I have met him a couple of times. He did visit us, and then he died when I was about 10. But my dad's side of the family, they were all again. They were all raised in Pune and my dad, as well, went to a Christian school, and he all of the brothers left home as as teenagers. One went to the Navy. They all just wanted to start their own independent lives, and that's where he met my mum in in Bombay, or Mumbai, I should say so for both of them in terms of like my parents, background, both of them went to Christian schools, so their knowledge of history was very much focused on the core British history. Yes, there was discussions on partition, the British rule, but there was never any discussions on freedom fighters. A lot of what they know now of freedom fighters and post partition, what people had to go through, they learned just by talking to people or reading books. So my dad's side of the family, I was aware that they he had an uncle that had served in the Indian Army. Didn't actually realise until recently that there were two of them. And there were stories that had been told in the past that my mum had mentioned that, oh, you know, your dad's uncle was killed in the Army during the partition and but my dad never, really used to. He never, he never talked about it, and he only talked about it, I think a couple of months ago, when I gave my dad a book to read whilst he was going away on holiday by this wonderful journalist, Kavita Puri. It's a book called Partition Voices, and she's collated these stories of partition survivors here in the UK, those who had pre and after partition, those who had lost families, those who had also participated in violent acts as well, and kind of regretting it, and it really tugged on his heartstring. And we met up, and he discussed it in quite a lot of detail, and then he said to me, you know, my uncle had his throat slit on the train on the way back from Pakistan to Punjab, because he had a turban, which is a Sikh person's identity. And yeah, he was he was pulled by he was pulled they took his turban off. He was pulled by his hair, and his throat was slit, and he said, Do you know I actually found the letter in your grandfather's house that the Indian Army had sent to my grandfather to say that we've identified a body. We believe it to be your brother who would like to come and collect his items, his address, so forth. So I started becoming intrigued, because you hear these stories about those who serve in the army, they get this send off. So I said to him, did he get this send off? Where are his things? What happened afterwards? My dad said, I have absolutely no idea, because my dad just never spoke about it. So I said, How did you know? And he said, Oh, you know, my your grandmother, used to talk about it in conversation, and I think he found it quite hard to really have a specific kind of emotion, because it didn't really feel real to him. It wasn't like it was associated to him. But I think reading that particular book, I think, yeah, brought it closer to home. So I think, I don't think he I don't think if he hadn't met my mum, I'm not too sure whether he would have moved to the UK as well. I think he was quite happy in his life in India, but he wanted a future with my mum, and she said, it's going to be the UK. And he said, that's absolutely fine.

Rolf Killius 09:23

So they met in Mumbai?

Sejal Sehmi 09:24

They met in Mumbai

Rolf Killius 09:25

Then they went to the UK afterwards?

Sejal Sehmi 09:27

No, they met in Mumbai. And then actually, what had happened was, whilst my mum was in college in Mumbai, she my grand my maternal grandfather's health started deteriorating, and they weren't getting the support for their family. And because my mum already had cousins here in the UK, they said, her parents have said, you know, we need to move to the UK like soon. And because she's from Kenya, she they all had British passports anyway. They all wanted a better future. They all wanted better, better lives for them, themselves. And it was suggested that my mum go go early, you know, leave college and go to the UK directly. She came here alone, by herself. She was quite excited. She was really excited, you know, I said to her, when there wasn't there any anger, like resentment. And she said, Are you kidding? I was excited. And she she initially stayed with some of her cousins, but she wanted to live independently. And that's when she moved to Kingston, and she rented a place with, I think, an Indian family. She worked. She started working in the city, and she did all kind of, all kinds of jobs in the city. She'd worked, like in a wine factory. It was very much an adventure for her. And she was still in contact with my dad in the best way possible that you could in those days. And when she went back to India, they got married, and then they both came back here together, and my dad was very much on the same page that, yeah, you know, we're going to have children, we're going to have a family the UK, and at that point, I'm talking about, like, at that point in time, and their financial situation and and their kind of hardship that they were enduring, it was really, you know, survival of the fittest, and they felt that they didn't want their kids to have to go through or endure hardships like they had to, or their parents had to. And then they came over here in 1976. They've been here ever since. It stands out now it's only when you really start to think about it and recollect childhood memories that it was definitely my dad who was struggling more than my mum. You know, my mum was very much she had just this one direct focus, and London was her dream. We're going to make it happen. And, you know, similar to other people of their age, they found they became friends with other Indian couples had also migrated over, say, from like India, Africa. My I think my dad's struggle really was the fact that he his experiences of racism was quite nuanced and passive aggressive, and it was that very unsettling feeling. He his first job was in the railways. He's still in the railways till today, and one of his first jobs was, he was, he was cleaning something. I can't remember whether he said it was on the track, but there was a bit of dirt, I think, like on his hand. And his colleague said he went to go and wash it off, and he said, Well, there's no point in washing it off. It's not like you can see it. And it was, it was unnerving for him. And I said, well, didn't you react? He said, No, I don't want to draw attention to myself. But also, in another job that he'd gone to, his manager at the time must have had a really bad experience with a former employee who happened to be Bangladeshi, and he made that same assumptions about my dad, and he made him do really, really, you know, the worst of all tasks possible. You know, wanted to humiliate him, and my dad just took it in his stride. My dad focuses just like, I've got a job, I've got to be thankful I've got a

job. That's it. And when he also, when he had joined, people couldn't say his name, so he was trying to make it easier for his colleagues, and he took his surname, which is Sehmi, and said it's fine, just call me Sam. And to this day, this name still sticks. If I call up my dad's office, I'll ask for Sam, and they will, they'll refer to him as Sam, but they will, you know, other behaviours. There was something that actually he told me the other day, and I felt like he was choking a little bit, and he said to me, the same manager started to change, change his opinion about my dad, and he could see that he had, you know, wrongly judged him. He was hard working. You know, you shouldn't tarnish everybody with the same brush. And he they started becoming a lot more friendlier. And then my dad said one day he was sweeping the ground, and there was another colleague who was just looking at my dad, you know, in a kind of really distrusting manner, and he was smoking, and my dad cleaned the ground, and then he stubbed his cigarette out in front of it, and my dad just brushed it away, and his manager saw it, and he said, What are you doing? Can you not just see Sam swept that and that gentleman, I shouldn't call him a gentleman, but that man turned around and said to him, whose side are you on, mate? And it was like and I said to my dad, wow. You know he was backing you up. And he. Like, well, it shouldn't have happened to begin with. And it's a lot like I said, it was much more passive aggressive. And also, I think he used to, he got like malaria a couple of times, you know, he was, he was ill a little bit. And I don't think like he felt, like he he felt, you know, fitted in initially, whereas with my mom, she just saw it as well. We have no other option. I'm going to fit in no matter what it takes. So with my mum, she was working in Fleet Street national coal board, and her manager was a much older gentleman. I don't think he was accustomed to seeing Asian faces or ethnic minorities, and he used to call my mum's name is Ranjana, and he just used to call her Janie. And she found it endearing. I said, Well, that's not your name, didn't you correct him? And she said, Oh, it's okay. He was so old he doesn't know any different. And on her when she was pregnant with me, on the last day. He basically said, on the last day of work, you know, we haven't, I've never seen somebody dressed in a sari. And so she came, she went up to the city in a sari, because they were fascinated. And I don't think she took any offence to it. I think she took it as quite complimentary that he was actually trying to learn about her culture and her background. But as we moved around a little bit where my mum, she'd had a couple of shops. We had a shop around the New Malden area. She had a dry cleaning business. There was definitely derogatory comments thrown her way. You know, just bunch of youths hanging around the shop, derogatory comments. And for her, it was like, Yeah, whatever, in one ear out the other, it didn't, it didn't faze her, because she had such a strong sense of belonging here. She was like, This is my home. I think with my dad, it took a lot, lot longer. And I think that kind of changed as we came along, as we were growing older, as we were all becoming individuals, and how immersed we were with things like, you know, Christmas was a really big deal in the house. It still is Christmas, and I was part of the choir, and my mom and I are very active in like and my dad now, recently, is all community work, and by community I don't mean ethnic minority community groups. You know, my mum and I have worked with the local church in Kingston, specifically during COVID and food banks. My dad worked with the New Malden community on some of their history and heritage, and I think he's kind of found his space now, found the right sense of belonging. But I think both of them definitely played down on their experiences of feeling of that feeling of indifference. They pushed it down because I think for them, their circumstance was that we made this choice to come here. We'd made this choice to come to this country. We're going to embrace everything, and we're going to make sure that we provide enough stability and, you know, protection around our children, that they don't are not made to feel indifferent. And I think I feel like that's their approach. You know, when they tell me about it, I still get like, sometimes my blood just boils. And I said, you know, you couldn't get away with that now

and and my dad said, but you're lucky. Look how thank look how lucky you are that people don't tolerate this, not to their that it's it still happens. But you know, there's literally zero tolerance in the everyday work life, in places of education, but I think, I think I wish, I wish my dad would I wish my dad would emote more. I wish my dad would, because it's not just about the fact that he didn't know his uncle, so you don't really have that direct connection, but he knew of the situation, what happened, and he didn't speak to his dad about it. And he said, Well, there's no point, you know. And I said, but that's it's important, and I think that would have helped him build a different maybe bond with his father. And I said to my dad that I don't want that, like I'm we're all really close to my dad, and I've always said to my dad, I don't want you to feel that there's any form of like trauma that you couldn't speak to us about, because I feel that it shapes you like it does shape you. And I don't know, I think with my mum, I think she's so engrossed in, you know, communities, and she's the life of every party. You know, she's always making everybody else happy that for her, she's quite happy to suppress any of those negative experiences, and she continues to do so. And I think they've tried to, I think they've tried to instill it in us. But you know, our reactions, obviously, to having similar experiences my parents, I think, is probably a little bit, is probably different we would react. We have reacted differently, for sure.

Lata Desai 20:15

So can you talk a bit about how that has affected you?

Sejal Sehmi 20:20

I think..So when I was born, we didn't have any family members here that could support my parents in in child minding, and my parents weren't really in a financial position for any of them to be stay at home parents, like any parent, they wanted to give their child the best, whatever it took. And I was at the age of, I think, like six, seven months, I was with in a child minder who was English, and I, you know, my mom still talks about the fact that how she gets very she feels, she has all these feelings of guilt that she couldn't be a stay at home mum. And, I mean, I have no resentment whatsoever, like I completely appreciate why she did what she did. And I was with this child minder for a very, very long time, because my parents could see how comfortable I was with her now when. And I think I was about just after I turned to is when the rest of my mum's family moved over to the UK, and at one point we were all living in in one house, and I was like surrounded by all of this love, but I just don't remember it, because I was so so young. And then my other two sisters were born as well, and my grandparents, my middle sister was spent a lot of time with my maternal grandparents. They couldn't look after all of us. So it was agreed that, you know, whilst my parents were working, they would look after my middle sister. I stayed with my child minder as much as possible. And then the youngest, poor thing was, you know, my mum used to drag her around in a, in a in a buggy. Guess, I think we still make fun of her. But it, what was interesting was, is that I don't remember when this happened, but because I was in my child minder for so long, and I was very, very close to my child minder's children. I used to hear them all calling her 'mum', so I automatically just called her 'mum'. What else do I call her? And even to this day, you know, I'm still in touch with her. I call her mum because I don't know how else to address her and I say to my mum, you know, didn't it ever like bother you?

I think she said, No, little bit. But she said, you know, she said you were very well aware that this is babysitting mum, and this is your mum, mum. So I think she felt quite comfortable that I was aware that this wasn't a mum replacement, it was just a name that I was calling her, and what I saw was, is that she was looking after children from all backgrounds. They were like African, Sri Lankan, and in this white household, I'm there with these, all these other kids of mixed background. So for me, I thought that's that was what normalised families looked like, you know, being mixed. And that that to me, was quite normal. The school that I went to at that time was predominantly white. It was very rare to see somebody of an ethnic minority community, maybe a couple of black people. But I don't recall ever seeing anybody Asian. And I was always quite a reserved child. You know, I was always pretty quiet. I wasn't very confident by nature. I just kept to myself. And all of my friends, of course, were white, and there was this one particular, well, there were two. There was one incident where, and again, I wouldn't say that's racism as such, but there was one incident where my child minder was late in picking me up. So I was at the school office, kind of in the reception area. And so from the corner of my eye, I could see my child minder walking up towards me, and I got up, and I was like, Mum, Mum, I'm here. I'm here, and the lady in the office was like, No, darling, that's not your mum. I said, Yes, she is. That's my mum. She said, No, darling, that's, that's not your mum. And I didn't, it didn't really register why she would think that. Obviously, now I can see but we didn't look different, but it was just that blatant assumption at the time. Well, how can she be your mum and my child minder then explain that I am her guardian. Yeah. And the other incident, I think, which was around, you know, prejudice of my skin colour was, there was this one of the boys who was my friend, he wanted me to we're playing a game. And then I think he wanted me to be part of bullying this other child who had clearly had disabilities. And I was like, I'm not, I'm not going to do that. No, I'm going to tell on you. And he said something along the lines. He didn't use the P word, but there was a distinct word that he used, which I'm not going to be explicit about, but it was very much focused on my colour of my skin. And he said, you know, well, you can't, we can't hang out, you know, I can't hang out with somebody of that colour anyway. And I didn't, I didn't, I didn't understand it, and I didn't get it. And it really upset me. It really upset me. I was like, hold up a minute. Am I being admitted because I don't agree with what you're doing, or all of a sudden, because I look this way? And then I started to realise, Do I really look that differently? It felt very it just, it was odd. And I think I did tell my mum and then, but she didn't deal with it directly. She said to me, I think she told my child minder, I don't know what happened after that, whether it was carried forward or not, but I just remember being, I continue to remain unhappy at school anyway. You know, it was just, I think the incidents like that can kind of withdraw you a little bit more. And we were close to leaving anyway. I was close to moving to a different school, whereas, I think when I moved to the primary school, and at that point, and it was at that before I'd moved to that school, sorry, at that point, I didn't see my grandparents had already, you know, they'd moved, and they my sister obviously had a lot more involvement, like with them, and I didn't see my grandparents as much as well my sister was and I felt a little bit I used to see like how my grandfather would play with my sister, and I think, well, why can't he be like that with me? I didn't, I didn't understand it. I didn't feel that warmth. I just felt a little bit like it was a bit alien to me. You know, all of a sudden, like people speaking this language, and I couldn't really speak that well, I could, but I didn't feel that confident. And then we moved shortly after my grandfather passed away, and then we all actually happened to move on the same road. It was my house, my primary school, and my grandmother's house and my mum's brothers, and then it just took a complete 180 where my whole childhood was just with my grandmother. I was raised by her. We all were and my cousins and my sisters, and I got to I became so much more fluent in the language and food, and I was learning all these amazing things about my culture. And equally as well, like, you

know, even though my dad's family, a lot of them, were in India, there was a conscious effort to always make sure that we went to India and we got on with our cousins. And, you know, there was no kind of feeling of, oh, you're from the UK. It was just as if we'd known each other for years, we're still like that. So it, I think we were naturally accustomed to suddenly attending, like, you know, all of these culture events like that, Navratri, Diwali people get together. And I think at that time it was just, it was just amazing to see that, oh, you know, we can do this here. We can. There's so many, there's so many opportunities available to learn about who you are. We're really not, actually that indifferent. So my mind kept changing. We're like, doesn't really exist. You know, we're in the Tolworth Recreation Centre doing stick dancing. Everybody's watching. It's clearly accepted what we're doing, except for when I, you know, was that went to school. So school was a place where, again, I was accustomed to having lots of different friends. And the first primary school that I'd gone to, I was like, Oh, I'm not the only person who has a difficult name. Like, I'm not the only person who, you know, whose name the teacher cannot be bothered to say correctly. This was the first thing that they weren't bothering say mine, and they weren't asking me. And I felt bad for some of my Sri Lankan school friends who had much longer names, and they weren't even trying. So although it's not right, I did feel a sense of relief. Well, I'm not the only one. See, it's not just difficult for me, because I just couldn't be bothered. And in that school, you know, our headmaster, pride did himself on inclusion and diversity, all these big words, and I went on a skiing trip, and I think I was probably one of the only Indian people that actually did go on the skiing trip. So all of my friends in my room were all white, and we had we were walking back to our rooms one day, and I overheard one girl say to her friend, oh, 'Sejal had chocolate ice cream, but she can't tell if anything's on her face, because she's so dark anyway'. And I just went into the room, and I absolutely burst into tears. I don't I was trying to, I'm not too sure what I was angry about with the fact that she didn't think I was calling us. But again, it come back to, Am I really that dark? You know? Because again, there's still a stigma around in the Indian society, still that, you know, fairness is superior anyway, but I'm like, am I dark? Like, what does it what does it even matter? And my friends went straight to the teachers. The teachers went to the headmaster, who came to the trip. He made her apologise to me. He made this big speech to everybody that racism will not be tolerated, and that was the end of it. They did not contact my mum, the parents and the girls. The girls parents were not contacted. What should have happened is to for that to be taken further, and you know where your your origins of where you're understanding what shapes your values and what shapes your way of thinking starts at home. Doesn't really matter. You could be taught anything at school, but your behaviour and your your ideas and your ideologies that you create about people is what you watch your family. You know you watch your family and how they behave. And you we tend to mimic that, right? We mimic that along. So I said to my mum later on, when I was a bit older, and said, Why didn't you do anything about it? She said, Well, they never told me that. They I said, But I'm telling you, I told you. She said, what's the point? Nothing's going to change. I think it was her form of tough love, you know, because again, if we go back to her history, if she had a choice at that time as a youngster, she would have stayed in Kenya. She didn't want to move to India. And again, her ex, her own personal experiences of India, from a personal perspective, was quite negative. And it's, you know, she was very young to a teenager, and it was the hope of moving to a better future, moving somewhere where there were more opportunities, where you wouldn't find this toxic environment. So her, her way, I think of dealing with it was, well, I've taught you the resilience I've made I've taught you how to be resilient. I've taught you how to be confident. You've used that and you've stood up for yourself, but you can't then think that I could pursue this further, but she said, it's not going to it's not going to change. And I think it was also that, that concept of not wanting to bring, maybe what she thought at the time, the unnecessary

attention, back to ourselves, if the matter has been resolved in hand, let's just leave it. She said, this is just how it is.

Lata Desai 33:19

Can I ask you something... so these kind of experiences, did they kind of, maybe force is not the right word, but did you feel that you have to conform to the British way of or you go and make friends with people who accept you of who you are, or you'd rather stick to your Punjabi Gujarati?

Sejal Sehmi 33:43

No, no... I think because, and I say this because, I think from a very early age, I was used to being in a predominantly white area in terms of school, and it was just the small minority there that was trying to make me feel indifferent. It wasn't like the majority. And even when I moved to a primary school where there were so many of us, you know, I mean, predominantly Sri Lankan and Korean, I just became friends with whoever I became friends with because that particular incident, that skiing incident, it was my English friends, the only friends I had there at that trip, the ones who had, you know, come together and had were like my tribe and said, No, this isn't, this isn't on. We're gonna stick up for you. And that same mentality, I think moved towards when I went to secondary school, because some of those same friends actually moved to secondary school, and again, I was very accustomed to just getting on with whoever I got on with in secondary school. I think I did find that there were definitely bigger tribes of Gujarati girls, and I wanted to try and fit in with them, actually, as well, because they were all these, you know, hundreds of, like Patels. And then there's me with this surname, and people couldn't really work out what I was. And and for, you know, for for a while, I enjoyed it, because with some of these friends, I we used to go to, like, Indian events together, so you kind of had a bit of a tribe there as well. And it was also almost comical and quite cute. We would joke and laugh together in Gujarati and and, but I still remember we my sister, my middle sister, had joined the same school, and she came to look for me because she wanted to borrow money from me for lunch money, but she asked me in Gujarati, and the only reason she asked me is because maybe I don't know she want her friends to hear that she was asking money from her older sister. And so there was this girl who walked past and said, 'You can't be talking in your own language'. And I said, 'Look, we're not talking about you. It's just a private conversation'. And then the whole racist comments came out, and then it got into a fist fight. My sister lost her temper, yeah, yeah. My sister was, I'm not having this. And they got into a fist fight anyway. Then the headmistress got involved. It did get to that extent. And and I said to the headmistress, my sister had said, you know, this is what she said, It's not acceptable. Why should I tolerate it? And she said, Yeah, you're right. And then no action was taken. Now the conforming part, as you were asking me, it was not so much kind of conforming, but there were times when, when this girl used to kind of walk past, I would just the right thing to do, is turn the other way anyway, and I didn't want to bring attention, and she would still make like remarks, and I didn't rise to it, but there was the part of me thinking, there's no point even trying to argue it back, because maybe my mum was right, you know, the whole time. And when you are in such an institution, an institution of education, where somebody in authority has that power to

influence, has that power to drive this message about what the schools morals and values are, when that person remains silent, that speaks volumes. And I think that's maybe when I started to understand where my mom was coming from. Like, is it really going to change? There were so many of us, and you know, in the Kingston area, it's completely diverse. There's so many of us, and it's very common, and you hear about cultural events happening in small community halls. So we were there. We were in your face. But it didn't change people's ignorance and where you have the opportunity to drive that message, whether you're a teacher, whether you're a headmistress, whether you're a community leader, if you choose not to do that, not that, I'm not saying that suddenly changes thing overnight, but you you choose not to use your position to at least try and bring change, then what hope have we got? And yeah, we just shrugged our shoulders and said, You know what? What's the point? And I it's literally, and we're back to like 1980s or 70s, where probably my parents were were saying the same thing at the time. You know, when I when I argued, why didn't they say anything? And actually, we were probably in a similar situation ourselves anyway.

Rolf Killius 38:47

Did you ever had a confrontation where people question whether you belong to this place, whether you are foreign or foreign origin? you know, which is a step further even,

Sejal Sehmi 39:01

probably.. certainly not. It's an interesting question. I don't, I don't really think from during my time at education, it wasn't from English people, my sense of belonging was questioned by people of my own heritage, by people of my own origin. That's where I was questioned about, where I felt like my sense of belonging actually was because of my mixed background that came up into question a lot. And the irony is, is that throughout my whole childhood, neither me or my sisters have ever been made to feel indifferent amongst both sides of the family at all ever, we just fit like a glove. You know, we've been raised to speak two different languages. We've been raised to the extent we're now, you know, the number of times I stayed in India by myself for a significant period of time, my sister has. We can go independently to our parents house, where I was questioned on my sense of belonging started to happen at school, actually, when I was with this group of Gujarati girls, and I wanted to fit in. I wanted to kind of feel like I'm part of this bigger. It just seemed core. But it was just, it was a wonderful thing to be able to share all of this with other girls. And sometimes people would ask, I would, I think innocently, I think at that time, you know, oh, your dad's not a Patel? Is he ? So like what is he and and like, oh, so do you feel more this or more that way? And I was like, What do you mean this way or or that way? I think it was just innocent that. I think it was quite at that time in the 90s, there weren't very many children of mixed heritage then, but University, I think, is really where I started to question about what was actually my real identity. So I went to South Bank in Elephant and Castle, and there was an incredible number of Sikh Punjabi people there. I've never seen that many in my life. And a lot of them were from, you know, groups of them were the area from where Sikhs would predominantly live, like you have Ilford, East London, Walthamstow, Slough, Hounslow and I visited these areas, but, you know, I would feel like a right foreigner growing up in that kind of area where all Sikhs know each other. And, you know, Kingston always been kind of like a nice balance.

And there was the Hindu. They had these community groups, the Hindu community and the Sikh community. And I wanted to understand what you know, what are you learning in this community, what these community groups about? And I dated somebody from University of Sikh heritage and a Sikh background. And there were these questions raised about, well, also, what caste is your dad, and where is he? You know, What caste is he? What village are they from? I didn't have a clue. I had absolutely no idea. And and I asked my dad, and he said to me, Oh, we're Ramgharias. And I said to my dad, what does that mean ? It's just a cast. And he said, What's the difference? He said, I don't know. He said something to do with like villages and stuff like, why are you asking? And so I told you I was asking. And he said, it's great that you're learning. You want to learn more about your culture and your history, but he said, I don't want that to be a defining fact for you, when you're going to choose somebody you're going to spend the rest of your life with, you know, why does that matter? Because there is nothing that I'm aware of that traditionally, that particular cast would do. And the same goes for my mum's side as well. You know, there is this inter casting with Gujaratis as well, Shahs, Patels, Tailors, and so there's nothing that I'm familiar with, particularly caste wise, that either one would do that I would follow through in my marriage to anybody. And I think it raised a few flags for my dad, because he said, you know, if he's asking these kind of questions, now, what will the rest of your life look like? And, yeah, that did become bit of an issue, a flag, and we parted ways, and, you know, and there was somebody else as well. That same thing had happened, and it made me I'd also spoke kind of, I think, dated people where they said you're not actually fully Sikh. Are you? You know, your mum's still, you're still half Gujarati, and I'm like, define half. So you tell me right now, what makes you more Sikh than me, or what makes you more Hindi than me? Where is this benchmark? Are we talking about language? Tick, tick. Okay, maybe Punjabi. I can't, but I'm fluent in two other languages . Food - I can cook Gujarati and Punjabi food, okay? But let's not talk about dated values and just women being in the kitchen. What matters to us now were these tick boxes that you're talking about we have to conform to. And it did, I think for a bit, maybe in my 20s, I think I just started to think, you know, and it was, you know, it was a broad, of course, it was a broad stereotype. It was a broad theory to make. It was a broad assumption to make. Actually, that's the word. It's a broad assumption to make. The. Because, you know, in this day and age, not everybody thinks like, like that. You know, my sister's married to a Gujarati person. He didn't, didn't really care either way. And this mixed marriage isn't across the family. But at that time, because I was the oldest it was, there was conflicting things happening, where I think my mum's side of the family, because I was the oldest grandchild in their mind, I'm going to get married by at least 25 and it has to be a nice, Shah person. My mum's maiden name is Shah, and I was just like, explain. I'm trying to understand. What are these differences like here? And I'm just thinking. And I used to question myself like, am I Indian enough? If my chapatis come out like the map of India rather than round, does that make me less Indian? Does that make me less knowledgeable about my about my culture? You actually start to think. Think like that. You know, how much can you cook? Oh, but can you cook this? How many chapattis can you... it was stupid, like, kind of little comments like that, funny from family members as well. Like, you know, do you know XYZ? Because you know, when you go into a household, when you feed your husband and kids, and I'm thinking, well, who's who's going to feed me? We're not asking these questions to men. We're not asking we're not asking questions to men like, you know, my for example, my dad is a very good cook. I was round there on Thursday. We had a family get together went to watch Eastenders live, and my dad was completely in charge of the kitchen. I'm cooking for everybody. And that was quite although my mum still likes to take charge of the kitchen, which I think isn't normal for any woman, but whenever she was away, there was no issue in him cooking for us. So I think that kind of sense of belonging really came from. It started to

come a lot from people of my own generation, which made me a bit sad, because I just thought, well, you know, our parents have come here to give us better lives, and have probably tolerated a lot more, you know, completely onto racism which should never happened. And of course, it's important to embrace our culture and our language and we don't forget our roots, because it makes us who we are. But then, instead of belonging, what I feel is going to be different from us, it doesn't make it you just have to accept that it's not right or wrong, that we all have a different view, version and perception of what we feel is a sense of belonging. If you ask me now, at the age of 46 My identity is, is that I'm a good human being. Because I got so sick to the stomach of being in this constant battle. I think it's only one of the reasons I went to Brazil to just find something that I can say is, is, is me. And when I immersed myself so much in the Brazilian culture, with the families and in teaching and everybody just thought I was Brazilian, probably because of my skin tone, and I didn't allow myself to feel a foreigner. Now, of course, if you haven't been in the country long enough, you're not going to know, really know the ins and outs and the politics and things that you have to be aware of. And there's a term in Hindi we use, I don't know what the English translation is, Jugaar. There's a Jugaar for everything, a gamble the way around, for everything. And Brazil, as I say, you know, so I'm not going to know enough of that. So I'm still kind of foreign, but I'm not going to try and act like I'm I'm foreign because I want to blend in. And the reason I became so attached to it is because there was this big sense of family unity, the culture people getting together, and it's something that I could relate to because of how I'd been been raised, and it was just a life changing experience. And you know, again, when we talk about who you identify as? We South Asian women in particular are so accustomed to being identified with a specific role in life. It doesn't matter whether I'm British born, born in India, Africa, wherever you are across the world, there is these specific roles are at your cost identified with. It follows you. You know you belong. I'm born into a family. I belong to my dad, I get married, I take my husband's name, then I have a child, then I have another child, and so forth, you know? And it's a certain it's got to be at a certain age in a different culture, and however much people like to say, Oh, they're open minded, nobody thinks like that, like that, anymore. More, but your experiences of of people around you planting seeds in your head, where they self doubt, you become you know, you start to believe that. And that's why I went out to India, about this sense of belonging, because I started to question, Who am I? Am I a British Indian woman who's carved my own niche? Am I this oldest daughter? Am I the oldest sister? Am I the oldest granddaughter that can have no faults whatsoever? And I went to India at a time where I had lost my job, the flat where I was living in at the time, the landlord had sold the place. So I was back with my parents, and my sister was getting married and and it was, it was wonderful. But there was, you know, you feel a sense of kind of, you start to feel a sense of like, who am I? Like, what am I doing? When people are like, Oh, you lost a job. Just find a rich man, and you'll be sorted. And, you know, ignorance not directly from my family members, of course, but it's there and somewhere along the line, and there was a phase with my mum where we didn't get on at all. You know, she hated me. I hated her. There was people around my age group. I was getting more wedding more wedding more and more wedding invitations, and she said, See, this person's getting married, this person's get, this person's getting married. And I was like, I just need to get out of here. I couldn't. Now. I don't live with her anymore. It's a completely different relationship. And I literally on a whim with my filmmaker friend. He studied in he used to study in Whistling Woods in Bombay, and me and him, over a large bottle of wine, decided to do a crowdfunding page. We took a one way flight to India and some of his colleagues. We found a cameraman, and we filmed around Bombay, Delhi, Jaipur and other places to really look at what is society's expectation of a woman now in India, what are women doing? You know, how do women identify? How do they identify themselves? And it

was incredible because I spoke to like marriage counsellors. I spoke to the Head of Psychology at Delhi University, and there was the changing face of the woman in India. You know, these labels, they're not labelled anymore. There wasn't somebody who was like, Oh, I'm a mum and I'm this. These are people that were carving out businesses for themselves. These were, like, even, like, my maid that I had, you know, she's juggling across work two different like, burner phones on the phone to her husband, and like, rushing to get the vegetables and just multitasking with a smile on her face. I'm on the local train in Bombay, and you've got women on the train, they've got a chopping board, they've got their potatoes, and they're chopping away while they're chatting to their husbands, yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll be home in a bit. It's just, it's incredible. And I just think this, this passage of rights that people are kind of expected to go through, and I'm talking about, this is 2012 in India didn't exist. It really, you know, I'm talking about women of not so much like it in villages and so forth. Because obviously there, it's still a little bit more conservative, different, you know. But people who are of my generation, also working, also happen to be single or divorced or whatever, and I just it just resonated so much that I wanted to keep continuing to have that conversation. I wanted to keep pushing the boundaries that why am I still made to feel indifferent? And I kept pushing on it. That's when, you know, I started contributing to these magazines, and I formed the UK team at Brown Girl magazine. And these stories are coming up to the stories that needed to be heard. And I look around me and I just think it's it's heartbreaking, because the same kind of community, if you like, to give a universal word that you know, that raise you, that protect you, that teach you to be like independent often, are the same people that don't allow you to have your own seat at the table and make you question, well, where is my seat at the table? And I think I got more courage when I filmed my grandmother's journey, because I had been approached by a charity, Global Arts, and they were doing a storytelling project and heritage, what does it mean to be a British woman? So I said, What does it mean to be a British Indian woman? And I just thought. Well, let me film my grandmother. I filmed my mum, and then I presented it at Rose Theatre, and then I spoke live about how their journeys impacted me, and I'm really thankful that I did, because my grandmother now has got Alzheimer's, doesn't remember any of it, but this is the first time I heard her speak so candidly about her entire journey from, like as a child, never being able to have access to education, and now I can understand why she pushed my mum so hard. You know, if you want to get your business, you get your business. I'll look after the girls she raised, all of us cousins, even when, like, when the on my sister, my mum's sister in laws, when they wanted to go back to work, my grandmother was like, it's fine. You leave it with me. She spoke very candidly about this notion that family is going to be there for you no matter what. She completely outed her husband's family, saying, Where were they when we needed them? We had to start from scratch. And I started to understand why she didn't feel that sense of belonging in India at all. And for her life, UK, is her home and will always be her home, and she wanted to make sure that we were all raised that way as well. And so I think if she didn't have that courage to speak up, I don't think I ever would have known and appreciated it. And she said to me, when I finished filming, she said, You know what, you're the first person that's ever asked me about me, and you forget that, because we take this for granted. So I mean my family, of particularly my parents, you know, they're very supporting in anything that I do. They pushed me to be financially dependent. Follow my dreams, don't worry about what people say and and I understand from their perspective. You know, everybody wants to see their child happy and companionship and so forth. But, you know, there's a lot more of a transparent communication there. It's easy to be blindsided. It's easy to kind of feel a sense of indifference and question whether I really lived up to the expectation of what people think, where I should be. Oh, you're doing so well. You've got your own place, so you've got you're working in the city, or you're doing this. Wouldn't be nice if you

just settle down now as well. There was no need for the but this is the thing we can we can cut out that, but just take it for what it is in that moment. Because I think, you know, South Asians, we're very emotional. We're very emotional people. You know, we're very big on emotions. When we cook for the masses. We do it out of love. Nobody should go hungry. That's what I love about my culture its so, you know, we're so big on that. And I think, you know, I think at the same time you can't, you can't box people, you know, and you, you put them, you thrive on it. But at the same time, you kind of have this, there's almost like this, love, hate that. Where am I in your circle? Where am I in your kind of Where do I belong? I think a really good example, right? Is is wedding invitations that I throw it out there. This is a conversation that I've debated about with people in my family. So typically, Indian wedding invitations are very grand. They don't do things in in small pieces, you know, it's big and lots of decoration and quite costly if you're going the traditional way. And a lot of the times when there's a family wedding that's happening, and I've been invited to as part of that kind of with my family, the invitation typically will just go to my parents house, and my mum will call me up and she said, Oh, we've been invited to this. Yeah, great. I'll come along. It's never really fazed me, you know, like I didn't. I don't feel offended that. Why didn't they send me one directly? I'm like, Yeah, great. I'm there. My sister, who is married, because she lives quite far, you know, she'll, she'll get one sent separately. So it just so happened that there was a wedding that was happening, and I think my sister got, like, an invitation, right? All of our sisters got invitations individually. And somebody in my family questioned, like, Well, why did you get one individually? And I was like, I don't know. Maybe because I don't live there. They said, Yeah, but you're not married. I understand why your other sister got it. But you know, you typically come under your dad's family, so I'm not owned by them. I'm not owned and it was. It's interesting how this was debated so hard, not by somebody older, somebody of my generation. Well, you know, why would you do that? And I remember when my cousin got married, so typically, when it's a close family member, you would personally write there. So it was my mum's brother's daughter that was getting married, and we were all heavily involved in the wedding anyway. I had all the time booked off so, you know, I knew what dates I had to keep free. And we were all quite, you know, involved in it. And my grandmother and my mum's brothers went to my parents house to personally give it and, you know, make us tea and snacks and everything, and took pictures. And my mum was like, Oh, we've got the official invite. And I was on going anyway. And my grandmother piped up, and she said,' Hold up a minute. We haven't got ..what about Sejal invite? We have to go to Sejal's house and give her an invite'. My mom said, 'doesn't matter. You know, it all counts as one. She's going to be there.' And my grandmother said, 'No'. She said,' We need to write another invitation, and we need to give her that same level of personal respect, and we're going to go to her house and give it to her personally. I want her to feel we're personally inviting her, and she's gonna make tea for me and we're gonna have snacks. 'And it really it moved me so much that my 90 year old grandmother, who's got Alzheimer's, felt that it was important to see me in the same regard that I wasn't. I didn't actually belong to anybody, but they didn't do it, and it was fine. I said, don't, you know, don't want to put anybody out. We're all busy anyway. But I just found it so fascinating that things like that make you kind of feel, so, Where do I belong then? So until I got a ring on my finger, well, I belong here. We're not owned by anybody. You know, yes, I still have my father's name, which I'm, I'm proud of, but he raised me to be completely independent. So in the same way, my father would say to me, you're not owned by your husband, it's an equal it's an equal partnership. And I think this kind of nuanced behaviour, I think is still quite prevalent in South Asian communities, where it's very easy to feel, yeah, a sense of indifference, for sure, especially during weddings. I definitely feel it during weddings.

Lata Desai 1:02:36

How did you feel when you went to India? Did people see you as a foreigner or as an Indian? Or one of them?

Sejal Sehmi 1:02:43

I think it depends on it is, you know, when we talk about, what does foreign mean, we automatically associate it being not from that country. Every time I used to go with my dad, I think when I did when I first, when I went, when I was a baby, when my dad took me, when I was 10, I stuck out like a sore thumb immediately, and that's purely because my mum decided to dress to have my wardrobe in the most, you know, outlandish outfits that would make me stick out like a sore thumb, You know, these are very English skirts, very English outfits. I'm on the local train, and I'm wearing a summer hat that's bigger than my head. Of course I'm going to stand up right? And I was teased. I was teased by local children. The locals would look at me, they'd all point and stare. And I hated it. I absolutely hated it. My hair was cut really, really short. I used to have really long hair, and I said, Oh, because of the heat it'll be hard for you to manage. No, it's not hard for me to manage. It's hard for my dad to manage. That's why you cut it off, and that's why I stood out. I stood out a lot, and my dad's family never, you know, my dad's family never, really. They never assumed that I couldn't speak the language. They never assumed it very comfortable. My cousins were loved. I was very young, but I had such a great time with my cousins. And you know, there was never any worry about food. The only time where I think we talked about this the other day, where we did stick out, where it was obvious I was a foreigner, is my struggle to use the Indian toilet when I'm like, What is this? And even when I used to go back a couple of times with my dad and at this my grandfather's brother and his wife, who I used to call as my grandparents, because my own passed away. Initially, their house only had an Indian toilet, and I was quite young. I said to my dad, I can't use it. So we knocked on his cousin's door across town just to use a toilet and things like that. Definitely I would, I would stand out, but we're talking about being in much smaller towns. It's like when I went with to Gujarat, with my mum, to her village for the first time. Even though I was dressed in very simple Indian attire, people there know automatically that's not how they you dress. My mom had short hair. You speak with a bit more women we were speaking with a bit more confidence. So they think you're either from a city like Bombay, or you're just foreign altogether. So certainly, I think if you you do stand out in smaller towns. I think in places like Bombay and Delhi, like nobody, really, nobody bats an eyelid. You know, I can get around. I think the only time where somebody in Bombay, I was in a rickshaw, and he said to me, in Hindi,'Madam, you're not from here. Not from here, are you? 'And I thought, Oh God, I hope I haven't did my Indian my British accent suddenly, come here. He said, 'You're from Delhi, aren't you?' And I just nodded my head, and I said, it's exactly where I'm from, because I must have used some Delhi slang. So I had to keep converting the time that I spent travelling in India filming, it was because we were predominantly, I think, kind of in cities and so forth. It was quite easy to blend in. I mean, like I said, nobody batted an eyelid when my attempts to use the local train by myself. I definitely think I probably stood out a bit more because I'm in a woman's compartment. But again, you know, there's a certain there are only certain people that would use the local train. If you've got the facility, if you've got a car, if you can afford to

take a rickshaw taxi, you will take that. But me fighting my way through just to buy a five rupee ticket to get on the train, and how people, yeah, people would look at you. People would definitely kind of look at you. You do kind of stand out a little bit on the metro in Delhi, not so much. I think because people who were in the city, back and forth, they use it. I actually got mistaken for being the maid at my cousin's house when I went to visit them when my uncle had died, and there were lots of people come in to pay their condolences, and I was borrowing my cousin's clothes, like jumpers and baggy shirts, and because I didn't bring enough warm clothes, I think I underestimated how cold it would be. And I was serving the tea and asking, Would you like anything else? And somebody had said to my auntie,'Is that the new hired help? 'And she said, 'No, that's my niece from that's my niece from London'. So there definitely wasn't any doubt that I was a foreign at all, but I think it really depends on where you are, your surroundings. What about work situations in Britain here? Do you feel different? Or do you feel they treat you differently because you are Indian or? I think at the beginning there was definitely there. I, you know, in technology, when I started my career, 20 years ago, the sector that I work in in financial services, firstly, it's notoriously male, you know, and the level of sexism there was just insane. I worked on the trading for a lot, and there were lots of comments, derogatory comments, people try and touch you and stuff. It was, and it was, there was, yeah, a couple of times where maybe curry comments and stuff, and the assumption like, oh, so are you muslim then? And and I said, No, also you have an arranged marriage and all these stereotypes about you. There was, it was very much there. And we didn't have there wasn't anybody that looked like me where I could stand up for myself and and again, maybe I became submissive, you know, unconsciously, in the same way maybe my parents had done, because I was in this job and I just wanted to get on with it. In terms of the sexist behaviour, there was one firm where I'd mentioned it to a colleague, and she said, Well, you know, they're traders, like, what do you what do you expect? And that seemed to be like the end of that. And as I started kind of moving up in the ladder, there were lots more South Asian people, black people, coming into similar positions. And it's, it's kind of akin to like when my parents first saw Trevor MacDonald presenting ITV News, or seeing like an Indian television like, Oh my God. Look, look, look, you know, like a sense of, Oh, wow. One of us can make it on television. It's that proud feeling. And it was very much the same in the work environment. I did feel like, Oh, this is, it's nice to see this again. It was still very much men. And, you know, very few women. There were some, there were some, some women, but very few. And the comments would be there, I'd gone out once with with the traders once, and we were talking about skiing. And I said, Yeah, I don't really I went skiing. I didn't enjoy it. And this guy was like, Yeah, but your lot don't do skiing, do they? And I was like, What does your lot mean? What women, curly haired women? I didn't understand it. And he said, you know, and he went, and I said, Okay, firstly, I said, you know, let's get the background, right? And I'm not Muslim. I'm, you know, my parents are of Indian origin, Sikh Hindu background. He said, how is that different? I go, you know, they're different religions, and it's from different parts of Asia firstly. And I said, you'll be surprised at how many you know. I said, it's a very general assumption to me. And he said, he said, 'I'm sorry , its my ignorance. I've just never seen it' and he apologised. I don't think he meant it out of malice. It was just like, oh, we do things like that, and yeah, the odd kind of Yeah, arranged marriage comment and stuff. It became less and less, I think, as they started to be more South Asians. But I think what was interesting was that where sometimes it was, like, maybe with my family, like when they moved to this country and they became friends with other Indian couples, because you are going through the same struggles you are going throug the whole sense of like, oh my god, this is a bit foreign. How do we fit in? You know, what are you going through and bring it's like a reminder of home, almost back then, in the 70s, and so it was nice to see. But you know, during the course of the career, there would be more and

more. I had managers that were black, CEOs that were Indian women, and it was just inspiring. But on the flip side of that, the one thing that did come up on a number of occasions was people of the same ethnic minority background, crossing that bound, crossing that personal boundary, crossing the line of personal boundary. And I don't want to tarnish everybody with the same brush, but it's kind of like, oh, you would tell and then it kind of moved on to Oh, so you're not married yet. Oh, you know, like, how old are you? When are you going to get married then? And like, where did, where did this suddenly come from? You know? Like, why you India goes? Why you Indian girls are so fussy, you girls are like, you know, you all just want to be independent. You know, you don't want to, like, date, like white people and look at where you're surrounded by and I was like, it was very again, it was the handful. But there was a pattern. It was happening. And I do remember at this tier one big bank I was at, I had an unbelievably awful experience with a South Asian colleague, and it was difficult because, you know, I was very much not wanting to rock the boat. I wanted to use this experience and further my career. And he had started to again ask me, kind of, like, quite personal questions. Oh, like, So, where do you live? Where do I Where do I live? I'm like, oh, so husband and children. I go, No, just me. Oh, right. So your family, what are they in India? Said, now my family, like, 10 minutes down the road. He said, Well, why would you not live with them? And I was like, why would I live with them, you know, like they were the ones that told me I need to, you know, become financially independent. That's a bit strange. And I said, It's not strange. And it was kind of, there were very, very little, you know, little comments that were made throughout that something about my dad wasn't, wasn't, was in hospital for something, and he was recovering, and I came back to work and he said, you know, you should remember now that your parents are getting old and just make them happy and just find somebody and not not listening to this. You know, my dad didn't get ill because I'm not married, you know, you got that's not, that's completely unrelated. I was like, Thank you for thank you for your thoughts. I'll keep that in mind and just shut the door on it. I just could not be bothered to to get into this, because it came back to what my mum said, that you can't change everybody's mind. And he was, he obviously came from quite he was British, born here, and his wife was a stay at home mum. He was clearly a very strict father. You could hear him on the phone having a go at his wife in Urdu, he lost his temper on the phone when he found out that his daughter at university was hanging out with a male friend, and it was just so inappropriate to have that conversation there, because I could understand the whole thing, you know, and he went on to say, she's got no shame girls like her. And I just thought, wow, wow. You know, it was very sad. And I kept it. I kept to myself. I thought, I'm not getting nothing to do with me. Not my business, until there was an an issue that had happened with work. And being on the trading floor, you have to resolve things in kind of quite a timely manner. And I was on the call to a particular vendor trying to fix things, and my colleague was helping me out, and this guy walks in, I need an update, you know, blah, blah. And I was like, this, oh, don't put your hand up towards me, you know, who do you think you are? And I'm like, I'm just trying to, like, resolve this, you know. And, and it just continued. He was thinking on, you know, could be in so many years. Hey, nobody's spoken to me like this. And my colleague was like, it's fine, you know, I'm helping her in the background. And I put the phone down, and I said, Look, if you give me a minute, I can explain, but I'm trying to resolve it. And he said, you know, you can't raise your voice at me. And I said, there's only one person raising their voice, and it's not me, you know. Said, 18 years I've been on the trading floor, and I've never come across this kind of behaviour. And I just thought, I wonder why. And you know, he was literally shouting down at me, you know, you don't know who you're talking to, this that. And I said, Okay, are you Are we done? Now? Are we done? And I said, I'm not speaking to you in this manner in front of everybody. If you want to talk to me, let's take it to a side. And my manager came in. She's black, and

she's known him for a long time, and she's very she's she's a woman who's kind of story I've found quite inspiring, and she knew what I was she knew about like Brown Girl magazine, and the work that I've done outside of work, in terms of filmmaking and writing. So I felt like she said I wasn't there at the time, so I can't comment on the situation. And I said, I know you weren't there, but I said other people were. And I said, it's just the tone and the language. I don't think I should be spoken to in that manner. And then he said, Well, I didn't realise was like that. And at this point I could see that I felt like she was trying to empathise with me, but her hands are almost tied, because he was a permanent employee there the same time as her, and I just knew this wasn't a battle I was going to win. And I ended up I quit a couple of months later, and my white colleague who came to my leaving drink said to me, I'm surprised that you didn't quit on that day, because he said, This is typical misogynistic, sexist behaviour, and he's judging you because you don't conform to what that box that a South Asian woman should should be, and this is coming from my white peer, because he's seen his behaviour. So I think that, yeah, has troubled me. That definitely troubled me a fair bit. I think a lot of the teams now, a lot of the companies now that I've been working for. They're quite global. So I work now for a firm that's Middle Eastern based. So I'm very conscious of am I and my team are like in Sri Lanka and the Philippines. So I have to make sure that am I articulating myself? Well, am I the girls? A lot of the girls in Sri Lanka come from smaller towns, and they're quite shy and timid. And I need to make sure that I'm not coming across as like too authoritative or bossy, and make people feel, you know, make people feel empowered. So it's almost like the roles have reversed. Am I being empathetic to my working culture around me. There is a lot more that happens in corporate firms pond, acknowledging and accepting of people's cultures. You know, appropriate behaviour, politically correct, like, if you like, I like, for example, when my boss interviewed me, he said the first thing he said to me, am I saying your name right? And I get that a lot now, in interviews, you know, am I saying your name right? Become very common now, but again, that didn't exist a while ago, and it's only because people are speaking up, not because we're deliberately trying to be like on the woke parade. As people would say, it's like, this is my identity. My name is my identity. So if you're going to say it, you know, don't make a Chinese mishmash out of it. Say it properly. Give it, you know, give it the respect that it deserves.

Rolf Killius 1:20:00

What is your wish, aspirations for the future, personally, but also for maybe at a such society level?

Sejal Sehmi 1:20:09

The ideal is lose all expectations of what you feel in terms of just don't or don't hold expect. I should say, in an ideal, we shouldn't hold expectations of how we think people should be behaved towards us. And you know, we shouldn't hold them, because that should already be ingrained. We should be people that are that are open, that are embracing, that are willing to educate themselves that would be the ideal. If you don't know, don't mimic you know, don't prejudice, don't have a bias about it, but educate yourself about it. That that would be the ideal. But equally for us, we shouldn't assume or hold expectation that the other person

knows or assume this is prejudiced, this is biassed. They probably just don't know if we're going to be talking about being proud of our culture and heritage, and let's talk about it loud and proud as well. I think I want to keep on storytelling. I want to keep being a voice of change, if I can, and I want to, I suppose I want, I want people, particularly, I would say, in my close proximity, to accept things as they are. Now, okay, not in that, not look for a cause and effect. If I do this, if we behave this, this will be the outcome. I'll expect this. You know, if you do this, you'll get a good husband. If you do this, you'll be forgiven. If you want to embrace something, you want to accept something, accept it in the now as it is. And if you want to change something, speak up and and be that change. Because I think we're living in an era where everybody, everybody has a voice and everybody has a platform.

Lata Desai 1:22:13

Just one question, you know, you talked about a change maker. Do you feel, obviously, your people immediate to you would have understood your thought processes. And do you feel that with that kind of that all the people who are proximal to you, do they understand your whatever you're talking about?

Sejal Sehmi 1:22:38

So I would start off with, probably with my mum now, more more now than before, I had a real, we had a real kind of struggle. Her expectation of me, not that anything was forced. Her views, her opinion, differed to mine massively. It was like I didn't feel like I was enough, and that was echoed by her family members, again, not in a deliberate way, but it was echoed in a manner that I didn't feel like I was enough, and it had a toll on me mentally and physically, and I went into a very, very, very dark place. Ironically, it was my mum that actually got me out of that dark place, and she supported me and started to understand me. And I think when I started documenting and when I started writing, particularly when I filmed her mum, because it's her mum, she could start to understand what I was trying to do. And my sisters definitely, I think my sisters definitely, I think maybe when we were younger, I think they had an expectation that I couldn't really have any faults. But some of the conversations now, particularly with my middle sister, that I'm having now, it's very warming to see that there's no judgement there, where she's sitting and she's trying to understand. And equally, I think she opens up to me about things that maybe I wasn't aware of, what she was going through again because of this bubble or this expectation of how we should be behaving, how we should be conforming. So I would say in my immediate proximity, yes, I would say, like my closest friends, and there are some people that I've, I think, organically distant from, because it's our thoughts and our values and our way of thinking is just not on parallel, like You know you're What are you trying to dig for? What? What is it? Just be happy, and it's not like, I'm unhappy, but like, why do you want to dig so much? And it's not the digging and the uncovering is not to portray anybody in a bad light whatever happened in the previous generations of all of their faults. This isn't something we're not discussing things to uncover how bad they are. We're trying to uncover, how can we learn from it? Right? How can I be in a position so that if my dad goes through anything traumatic, he can come and tell me, he can come and talk to me. I don't have to find out from some letter that was scooped away, and he takes it with him, you know, until his last breath, I don't want that, you know, and I don't

think he's ever been able to do that with his own father, which I'm still trying to get through to him. Sometimes I don't think he fully apprehends that. Sometimes I think he's a little bit apprehensive of what I'm maybe doing in some areas, like about heritage and identity, very open to it, but kind of social stigmas and maybe talking about one's mental health, I feel like he may be shy away from that a little bit because there are some demons that he doesn't want to face, which everybody will apprehend if you haven't gone through that, and that's okay too. It's just It's fine. I'm not going to expect I was disheartened for about some of the family members who didn't show up to come and see my grandmother's documentary that disheartened me. But equally, the number of friends that showed up was just incredible. People who didn't even speak, you know, who were English showed up because they said, this is important, your grandmother's story. How many other hidden stories are there? And I saw my grandmother's story, and now I realise why she has become like the way she is such a matriarch now I can understand why. For example, She also mourned when the Queen died, and she wanted to stand. She did stand in line for hours to go and pay her respect to the late Queen and lying in state and and when people say, you know, I remember when I collated, I put together an opinion article about South Asians division, about the Queen's passing and our views on it. And there were very mixed opinions. And people were like, you know, how can we be mourning somebody who was sitting on the thrown of our ancestors blood, sweat and tears? But equally, if you look at it from a different perspective, you know, it's all about perception, where my grandmother had such an indifference. She was aware of partition, freedom fighters, all of that. But for her, all she was doing in India was surviving. That's all she was doing. And she came to this country and she saw this matriarch who, at the age of 25 served her country, as well as being a wife and a mu and a grandmother, great grandmother, and she sees that because she never had education. She never had access to education. And that's where these, you know, different opinions, nobody's right or wrong in that sense, but people's own opinions of what we are trying to do, like what you have been doing, what you have been doing, there's going to be people saying, well, why are we uncovering something that happened so many, so many years ago? What's your purpose behind it? And lot of people, equally, a lot of people will say there is valid purpose here. We want to know. We don't want this to be forgotten in not in a deliberate negative or positive way, because it shapes us to who we are. I think if I had, if my parents maybe hadn't gone through any of that, I don't think they would have taught me to be as resilient as I was in maybe dealing with those situations of prejudice, of bias, where was I wrong in maybe not speaking up more. I look back now and go, No, probably not. I was probably able to just be the bigger person and walk away. But there's also that acceptance of, is it really going to change? You know, doesn't matter how many of these sessions you do about being empathetic and accepting of people, whatever your core values are that you have picked up and that it's ingrained in you that will remain as it is. You can bring you can bring the horse to the water, but you can't make it, you can't make it drink.