

Interviewee : Sheena Patel

Interviewer : Rolf Killius

Date : 19/03/2025

Where : 6 Eastlake Road, SE5 9QL

Summary :

Sheena Patel, an architect from Crawley, discusses her family's migration from Kenya and India to the UK. Her father's side integrated into British society, while her mother's family faced challenges in India post-partition. Sheena highlights her parents' marriage in 1980 and their subsequent life in Crawley. She describes her cultural identity, blending British and Indian heritage, and her work in South East Asia reviving ecological practices. Sheena's journey includes moving to Tenerife and returning to Crawley after her father's death. Currently, she works in the Sundarbans, fostering community development and environmental projects, emphasizing the importance of cultural integration and creative expression.

Outline

Sheena Patel's Background and Family History

- Sheena Patel introduces herself as an architect from Crawley, near London, working in South East Asia on cultural practices related to ecology and land.
- Her father's side of the family migrated from Kenya to Crawley before the Exodus and Idi Amin expulsion, integrating into British society.

- Sheena's mother is from Gujarat, India, born in a tribal area called Vaghai, where her grandfather set up a livelihood in foresting and community work.
- Sheena's parents met through an arranged marriage in India, and her father migrated to the UK with his family, integrating into British society.

Migration and Integration Challenges

- Sheena's father came to the UK in the late 1960s, considering himself very British with Indian and East African roots.
- Her mother, who was 18 when she came to the UK, faced challenges integrating into British society, including cultural differences and lack of support.
- The family migration included Sheena's father, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, forming a close-knit community in Crawley.
- The family saw better prospects in the UK compared to India, which was dealing with post-partition issues and economic struggles.

Cultural and Social Adjustments

- Sheena's mother faced difficulties adjusting to life in the UK, including domestic tasks and language barriers.
- The British weather was a significant adjustment for her mother, who was used to a warmer climate in India.
- Crawley was a close-knit community, with families supporting each other, especially women who faced similar challenges.
- The community formed strong bonds, with women supporting each other through pregnancies and other life events.

Community Life and Cultural Practices

- Men in the community also formed bonds, playing cricket and drinking beer, while women engaged in activities like cooking and makeup.
- Sheena describes a typical Sunday in Crawley, with men playing cricket and women doing chores and getting dressed up.
- The community celebrated both British and Indian festivals, blending cultural practices.
- Sheena's father was very British, focusing on business ventures, while her mother maintained cultural connections through community activities.

Family Migration to Tenerife

- The family moved to Tenerife in the early 1990s for business opportunities, where Sheena's mother had to learn Spanish.
- Sheena's mother found a sense of community with Sindhi people in Tenerife, similar to her experiences in Crawley.
- The family returned to Crawley after Sheena's father passed away in 1995, integrating back into the community.
- Sheena's mother continued to assimilate into British society, finding support from the same community that had helped her before.

Sheena's Identity and Cultural Heritage

- Sheena identifies as a creative, proud of her Indian heritage and the stories passed down from her grandmother.
- She has been visiting India regularly, working with communities and understanding her cultural roots.
- Sheena feels like a foreigner in India, labeled as an NRI (Non-Resident Indian), but she embraces her identity.
- Sheena's experiences in Crawley and Tenerife have shaped her identity, blending British and Indian cultures.

Education and Career Journey

- Sheena attended schools in Crawley, feeling different due to her unique experiences in Tenerife.
- She excelled in art and creative subjects, which led her to study architecture at university.
- Sheena faced challenges in the architecture field due to her background, but her creativity and resilience helped her succeed.
- She has worked on community engagement projects in India, Nepal, and Canada, focusing on cultural and environmental initiatives.

Work in the Sundarbans

- Sheena has been working in the Sundarbans for the past year, engaging with local communities and planting mangroves.
- She faced challenges gaining trust from the community but built relationships through hard work and dedication.
- Sheena has learned Bengali, participated in local activities, and integrated into the community.
- Her work focuses on creating sustainable livelihoods and preserving the Sundarbans ecosystem.

Future Aspirations and Community Engagement

- Sheena wants to continue working on community projects, integrating her cultural heritage and creative skills.
- She plans to return to the Sundarbans to develop long-term strategies and ensure the community's self-sufficiency.
- Sheena values the importance of understanding and integrating historical experiences, especially those related to colonization.
- She aims to contribute to a diverse and inclusive future, weaving together her personal and cultural experiences.

FULL TRANSCRIPT

Sheena Patel 00:12
So my name is Sheena Patel. I am an architect from Crawley, just a suburb outside of London near Gatwick Airport, and I'm currently working in the South East Asian context with communities and looking at reviving cultural practices around ecology and the land. So my father's side of the family came over from Kenya, and it was before the rush of the Exodus and the Idi Amin expulsion, they had come into Crawley, and they had settled in the suburbs. So my father and grandparents integrated into British society. They were one of the first families that came over in Crawley. And through, through that integration, they kind of set up a set up a livelihood for themselves, connecting and integrating in British society. So that's from my father's side, and how then I ended up here. So I'm a first born generation, you know, born in, bred in Crawley, studied in London, and through those avenues, I managed to kind of explore other ways of working.

Rolf Killius 01:28
Tell me you didn't mention your mother. Yes.

Sheena Patel 01:31
So my mother is originally from India, in Gujarat, it's a state on the west side of India, on the border of she was born in like an indigenous forest area, actually a tribal area in a village called Vaghai where the tigers... It was tiger territory. It was, it was a jungle, and the Dang jungle was, it was part of living with the tigers the communities, and my grandfather had set up a livelihood. He had migrated from Gujarat, our ancestral home. He'd migrated to the Dang to set up a livelihood and looked into foresting and working with communities in that region. So that's my mother's side of the story.

Rolf Killius 02:19
And can you ...Why did your parents come to this country, and how did they come to this country?

Sheena Patel 02:25
My father came through...hmmm...he came through before the influx, as I mentioned, in early late 60s, through a steamer, as my grandma would describe it. And so he was very young. He was around three years old when he came to the UK, so he considered himself very British, with a flare of Indian roots and East African roots, very proud of his heritage from East Africa, even though he spent very little time there. And my mother came through this alliance, this alliance of marriage when my father went to India, which was the norm in those days, and he met my mother, and they got married. So both of them came together, and that's how their family was kind of born. My dad came with both of my grandparents, my ba and my dada, my granddad and my grandma...both of them came with my my dad, my eldest uncle, his eldest brother, and his eldest sister. So it was a family unit that came as well as my, my grandmother's side of the family. So it was her sisters and her brothers. So they all kind

of came together. It was like a migration, a family migration that kind of integrated into British society and they supported each other as well. So at times when they were vulnerable to integration, they were there for each other, and that's how our family and our ancestral lineage moved from East Africa to the United Kingdom.

Rolf Killius 04:01
And why did they leave?

Sheena Patel 04:03
They left because they saw better prospect, and they saw what was happening in neighbouring countries. British colonies were kind of, freedom was giving up their kind of colonial right, rights, and policies were changing. New leaders that were coming independence was being formed, therefore they saw it as an opportunity to for a better life. Ultimately, that was the dialogue, and that was the vision and the narrative for most British East Africans and India was then going through, you know, just kind of after partition, famine, hunger. A lot of you know, very low GDP. There was a lot of economical, social factors that didn't ...India was not an option. So they chose to come to the United Kingdom and

Rolf Killius 04:53
And I suppose your mother also came with her parents, your other grandparents.

Sheena Patel 04:57
Yeah, so my mother, actually, my mother's side of the family was very much in India. My father, my grandfather, was a congressman, so his vision and idealistic was from a Gandhi, Gandhi perspective, and was like, I'm not leaving my country, so therefore. But the irony in that was, let me send my daughter to to the foreign land kind of thing. So for her, she was alone here, nobody, you know, integrating into alone, without family, nobody know. And she was 18 when she came so very young, very, you know, very feminine and very like, sheltered and with no support system except kind of trust, trusting my father's side of the family to kind of take care and and show her how life was going to be in the United Kingdom.

Rolf Killius 05:45
But they met here.

Sheena Patel 05:46
They met, they met in India. They my father went to India to get married. And that was, that was the that was the norm in those days where, you know, the men would go to India to find wives, as they like, to kind of and through that, my mother was brought into the family in the UK. (laughs)

Rolf Killius 06:08
And then what time was when they met?

Sheena Patel 06:12
They met, they met... It was 1980 they got married, and my mother came to the United Kingdom.

Rolf Killius 06:19
And how, how about the difficulties there?

Sheena Patel 06:23
I mean, for my mum, you know, my mom still says when she came to the house, for example, she went into the kitchen and the washing up needed to be done. And she, she used to this culture where the washing up is done for her, and then it so that was one, it was, it was very kind of domesticated, but it was looked upon like, oh, well, am I meant to do this? And, well, yeah, that was the norm. So those small nuances kind of framed her understanding of right. Life in the UK is very different from what we read and we have known about, you know, we see this foreign land is, is this place of wealth privilege? Actually, it's different to what the norm was in India and is in India today. So very different, very different experiences and the language, of course, you know, my mother was fluent in Gujarati, you know, my father was fluent in in English, with a few broken words of Gujarati could could converse, but very little. So there was this kind of union of coming together through communication, which was was difficult and but they managed. And so, yeah, this whole role of language and and culture as well as emotional I can't imagine how it was for my mother, coming from these privileges in India to not even a social construct, but the weather. You know, British weather was very cold at the time, and that was something that the body also and the mind needed to kind of get accustomed to, that you could, you had to, and that had an imprint. And a lot of people will speak about the climate, of how the sun and the cold framed settling in to the UK.

Rolf Killius 08:15
What about the society? Did they feel welcomed?

Sheena Patel 08:18
I guess, I am, I think, in the ...so I was born, as I mentioned in Crawley. And Crawley is a is a very close it's a small suburb, you know, a very small number of families kind of were there to support each other. It's real community, from my perspective, in the UK, it was just outside of London, so we didn't have access to to everything in terms that London did, even mindset, which I can come on to later on, but the families were there for each other. So my mum wasn't the only one that was going through these experiences. She had a community of women that were going through the same kind of familiar emotions. They came from, from India, together, they got married to these strangers, you know, strangers. Let's look at, you know, it's a very different dialogue to where we are today. And they married these strangers had to kind of come into these joint families, break through these kind of social traditions and these perceptions about the UK from India. But what was the beauty of Crawley was that these women came together. So there was a circle of women in the same age range going through the very similar experiences, different but similar. And they were able to then form a

pattern, and then they started having children together, you know? So there was, like this understanding of the land, the people, these marriages, these unions, but also this divine womanhood, connection. And I can see that 60 years later, I can see, you know, 50 years later, I can see these women come together. And when they talk about those, you know, those experiences, they're able to say, well, you know, when we were pregnant, we did this together, and that that's there's real power in that, you know that, in itself, was grounding and integrating, and then that kind of passed on down to us, and we were born into this community, and my friends and I all kind of grew up together through this, through our mothers. Whilst our mothers formed their own circle. Our fathers did the same, but in a very different way, whilst our mothers connected through tea, food, celebration, clothes, jewellery, and, you know, this makeup as well. I remember my mum being so fascinated about makeup, because it was like, Oh, you get to put colour on your face, which they didn't get to do in India. You know, it was like these natural dyes that they would apply on the lips, and that they kind of made these pigments, which was a beautiful concept. But so there's these western influences that kind of subtly came through in their day to day. And then the men also did the same. There was beer, you know, this beer, this culture of British society, beer pub, which the men got together and played cricket on Sunday afternoons. And Crawley, we used to have this club called Edwards. And every Sunday our mums would to do the house chores, send us with the dads, because it would be summer, we'd be playing games. And the dads were just very minimal, like child monitoring, but they played cricket, drank beer, had a barbecue, whilst the women did the chores, and then they would get all dressed up and curl their hair, and perm was a thing back then, and big earrings and Indian Dresses. You know, it wasn't even like they wore these western, beautiful Indian salwars Punjabi dresses, as they kind of call them. And they just came dressed up, and they would sit drinking their orange juice, you know? And the one, one or two women went ahead and drank a glass of wine, and that was like, Oh, my God. But that was a typical Sunday growing up in Crawley,

Sheena Patel 08:18
you just mentioned this quite idyllic atmosphere when you came together and the main groups, and, yeah, female group. How did they? How was their relationship to the majority white population?

Sheena Patel 12:19
So it was very like I grew up. My father was very British, very British. He was a man ahead his time. So even I don't know if he had the intention was to not kind of connect to his roots and his identity, but very much a man ahead of his time. So we, whilst we lived in a community with people in in Crawley, there was a very much we're different kind of thing. So he had for the community in that area. He tried lots of businesses, did a lot of thing. And then one day we he came home and we were packing our bags to move to Tenerife, the Canary Island, because, yeah, he wanted to set up businesses there, and so that's what we did. My brother, my middle brother and I were taken out of school. We weren't really in school, and he was like, You're gonna learn by going hiking, swimming, the beach, and you know, that's how you're going to learn for a few years, whilst I figure it out. So we moved to Tenerife. We had a villa. Our life was in Tenerife, and my mom was there again. I guess my

mom had to then have a second migration identity, because she was in Tenerife, she was forced to learn Spanish. Dad was forced to learn it, and he was fluent in it. But for her, Dad was busy with the businesses and setting up the business. But my mom felt home, the connection of home. So in Tenerife, she found lots of Sindhis. So Sindhi is a different type of demographic, so she went and connected with them. They would they were different. They weren't Gujarati, but they were Indian. So she would go to Kitty parties and enjoy the time with these women. So what she was doing in Crawley, she kind of had to uproot and do that again in Tenerife. So she was then very, sort of were aware of the rituals and the practices of Sindhi community, very different to the Gujarati community, the food, the music, the prayer, the gods, the Goddesses, the festivals. So they all started to feed into our daily lives, as well as our other Hindu festivals. So that was that, what that was then. So then we, whilst we meshed into British society, with with the with others, and we were still the others kind of thing within the other ring. So yeah, we moved to Tenerife. And after Tenerife we came. Back home.

Rolf Killius 15:01
When? When was this?

Sheena Patel 15:03
It was the early 90s. So then

Rolf Killius 15:05
you came back after,

Sheena Patel 15:09
unfortunately, my father passed away in 1995 which and our last business he opened was an Indian restaurant. And so my mom and us, we all had to pack up and come home. So that was Tenerife kind that was that chapter closed, and then my mum had to come home and fully depend on this community in Crawley to integrate back in. Except whilst we started making the transition before we had come back to school. My father's death was the ultimate shut the door for our life and our livelihood in Tenerife. So we came back to Crawley, where my mother once again assimilated with the community, with those women at the most vulnerable time of her life, and that's how we formed a very close knit community in Crawley. And we're very well. We've got a name and a reputable reputation. So that was our kind of connection to come back to the United Kingdom from another land.

Rolf Killius 16:19
But you said we come home? Did she not think she goes back to India? She can go to India?

Sheena Patel 16:24
Well, India was an option. Of course it was. Her father definitely wanted her to go home. Whatever home was, but she had her home was where her children were, and her home was where her husband had bought her a home. Her home was no longer India because she had spent her years creating and cultivating a home. So even now, when I speak to she goes to

India regularly, she's like, I want to come home. And the home she's referring to is our home in Crawley,

Rolf Killius 16:59
possibly you kept the home, also when you went,

Rolf Killius 17:01
Yeah we were in Tenerife. Yes, we still had our home. So that home was always home for us and for my mother too.

Rolf Killius 17:10
Do you remember any stories your father told you or your your grandparents? Well, yeah,

Sheena Patel 17:16
My grandmother, yes, I was brought up primarily

Rolf Killius 17:19

What did the tale tell you about East Africa?

Sheena Patel 17:21
Oh, you know, I think East Africa was this golden period of my grandmother's life. You know, she was like he had her house, her help, her garden, living in a community with other family members and friends, and wearing these cotton saris, and, you know, with gold and so to show that the privilege that they had, kind they had, and it was about, you know, also this, we can speak Swahili, extremely proud of of this, this linguistic that was merged with Gujarati, which we we all as first born generations have very proud of her time in Kenya, very proud, like, almost like, prouder than those who lived in India to be like, look where we had to come. But with that these, if we break down the psyche, there's a lot to to those feelings, in that emotion and that sort of ego, a little bit, I would say, however, but very proud to be East African. Very proud to be Kenyan.

Rolf Killius 18:25
They came from which place?

Sheena Patel 18:27
Nairobi. Nairobi. They were in Nairobi, in the city itself, and they had come over. I guess it was like whilst India gave them a lot, it was where the livelihood they had made, that livelihood in Kenya, East Africa, together with my grandfather and they had their children in East Africa, in Kenya, I can see why that place has a hold, and it's, it's something you know, we may never understand because we weren't part of, you know, those beautiful narratives of East Africa and those stories of again, like how they had to integrate into that society. Couldn't have been easy, but they did it, you know, just how they've done it here in the UK.

Rolf Killius 19:12
So they, they also migrated from Gujarat?

Sheena Patel 19:14
Yes.. So they migrated from Gujarat. My grandfather, actually, my Grandfather's father had passed away when my grandfather was very young. He was about five years old, and in those days, so they lived in India, in this, in this garam called Bhadran, my grandfather was an only child and my his mother. So my great grandmother had to then be dressed in a black sari and be kind of shunned, you know. So she was then sent back to her her maternal home, which meant that she was living in darkness for the rest of her life. So my grandfather's uncles, who were settled in Kenya, had come to India and saw that this, this young lad's life. So they took him, you know, and that time... that they did, you know that that was the norm to kind of hunt a gathering kind of, kind of principle. And so my grandfather had then been assimilated from a young age to Kenyan society, cut away from his mother. So these that trauma of that bond wasn't there, and that's how they were taken. That's how he went to Ken, Kenya, and then he came back to India. That was the norm to get married, where he met my grandmother, and they went to Kenya together, and started a life there. So for her, it was her prime years of similar to what mum went through. It was her time of, yeah. It was her time of having a livelihood, integrating into a new culture, a new country, a continent, even language and climate, and making a mark for herself.

Sheena Patel 19:52
Who are you?

Sheena Patel 21:00
Who am I?

Rolf Killius 21:02
thinking about all the stories?

Sheena Patel 21:04
Right ...So the Sheena kind of... I'm Sheena, I call... I'm a creative, absolute creative. That's who I am as how I identify myself. But behind that creativity, there's this identity of a woman who is extremely proud to be of Indian heritage, and those, those connections, those very faint connections to Kenya, because I haven't been, I was never able to hear the stories from my dad's first hand experience. They've always been passed down, so it's been difficult, on an emotional level, to understand what my father meant. You know, even though he was very young when he grew up, he left. So for me, it's tapping into this tapestry through stories of others, about Dad and but from, from what I remember of my Grandma, I'm trying to weave those into who I who I am today, and then my mother's side of you know that Indian heritage is very evident. I've been going to India every single year for as long as I can remember. I now work in India. I work for an Indian firm, and I work in communities on ground in India, in West India at the moment. So I've I'm trying to understand who I am through that, and so

I'm extremely proud, as I've mentioned, of of being an Indian. However, home is kind of and this idea of this, like in India, I'm a foreigner. Let's face it, I'm termed as this NRI, non resident Indian. And whilst you know people that I work with and friends that I have, we kind of have this sort of joking narrative around the privileges that an NRI has. Of course, I'm aware of those. However it's it's really difficult for an Indian, a Western, like a British Indian women to integrate into that land because my mannerisms, my language, my accent, everything changes, and and so. But then, when I am at home, whilst London, it is home, the UK is home, it's it feels more grounding. It feels more accepting. Grew up around a community in with friends and family members in Crawley, that was my childhood playing in the parks. And, you know, letting cycling around Tilgate picnics. And Tilgate Park is this beautiful park that we have, and we were lucky that we were in the suburbs, so we had lots of green spaces. So Crawley and growing up, particularly in the spring and the summer, was about being outside most of the time. And in the winters, in the cold months, it was about being inside together with family. So there was this contrast of like having the best of both worlds, you know, being with family inside, indoor. Celebrating festivals like Christmas was a big thing for us, you know, and so was Diwali, but we emphasised on Christmas so much. And then over the years, we kind of understood the significance of Diwali and incorporated that into our on our calendar. And now it's both festivals are equally as important. That's how I grew up in a very close community.

Rolf Killius 24:28
And how did you feel when you came in primary and secondary school?

Sheena Patel 24:32
So I came in a very later after Tenerife, I was trying to integrate into a schooling system that I didn't really have. I wasn't going to school like not children were who were around me, so my and I saw the world differently. I'd been in beaches, in climbing mountains in Tenerife, and then I was in a classroom. So the concept was very strange. And then there was this loss at home that was. Was, I couldn't quite understand, you know, one day my dad was at home, dropped us off to school, and then the next day he wasn't. So as a seven year old, there's a lot kind of you're trying to figure out, and then everybody around you is knows how to count, subtract, multiply, and you can, you can do that, but you do it differently. You know, my dad and mom taught me with with pasta shells and, you know, counting in different ways, not with the units that we had at school and a very conformed system. So I always knew I didn't fit in, but I didn't know how to stretch myself, because there was a societal pressure too. You know, there were layers of my upbringing to Crawley too. There wasn't just this coming back. There was this idea of grief too, and that played a huge role in who I am today. And I can't deny that that's part of my identity that that shaped how I saw the world very differently.

Rolf Killius 25:57
And how was your How did you see yourself there?

Sheena Patel 26:00

You know, I mean, like my teachers would always say, she's always up in the clouds, you know, with I was was talking to myself, talking to the clouds, and a different way of drawing and doodling and describing and articulating myself, because I had grown up in a very different environment compared to my my friends and those in the classroom. So I would describe it as, you know, very fairy tale, like as a child, which took some time to kind of snap out of that realm, you know.

Rolf Killius 26:37
And how was your relationship to the other kids?

Sheena Patel 26:40
I was very shy, very shy. I always with my friends who knew me from before I entered school, comfortable, but the school very shy, timid, quiet, very, very shy, like and scared. I don't think it was just the fact that I was quiet and scared to even put my hand up when I knew the answer. I look back and I think about that I knew the answer so many times, but I was so afraid, because I was scared to be vulnerable in case the answer was wrong. And that had stemmed from things that were going on at home,

Rolf Killius 27:19
right? But you, you went through the schooling system. You did your A level.

Sheena Patel 27:23
Yeah, I did. I went through I went through school. My first school, I was at Northgate primary school, and then I went through some middle school, Northgate middle school, and I remember my teachers always used to put me forward for these extracurricular art, craft, you know, they knew. I remember we had a bamboo making lantern workshop, which, you know, I did differently. My friends didn't, you know, they were very academic. And then it was in year six, and I remember we were studying ancient Egypt and ancient Greeks. And I was like, Oh, my God, these ancient civilizations sparked my curiosity to know more about the world, which then translated into doing a lot of music workshops and dance workshops within school. So I was very creative already in the middle school area, and then I went to secondary school, and my I focused a lot on art. Yeah, art was my kind of thing. Spent hours as I grew and did my A levels in GCSEs, spent hours in this in my classroom, painting, in my own time, my free time, my lunch breaks. You know, I was very intuitive and in tuned with subjects like food technology, textiles, religious education and history, world history. So those were the subjects that kind of made me different to my friends who were from the Indian community, who had grown up together, I was very different. At the time. I was afraid to be different. I felt like I was the weird one. But now I'm like, I'm glad that I had to go through that, because this is who I am. This was who Sheena is, and I couldn't block that up, which then led me to go study architecture at university. So I did seven years of training in architecture. And through architecture was a field you know, mine for me, because architecture is a subject that allows you to explore every social science and tectonic art, creativity, climate, land, ecology ritual I can go on. It allowed for that, and I needed a

container to spill that into something more tangible that allowed me to go in practice in a very different way. So that's, that's how I would describe my journey.

Rolf Killius 29:35
And did you experience something like racism? And

Sheena Patel 29:41
yeah, I would there were times in Crawley, there was, there were kind of differences. But in the school, and I must admit, in the school that I went to, it was very multicultural, and we kind of kept into our Asian groups, when I mean Asian, it wasn't just Indians and Gujaratis. It was like, Let's mix with the different ethnic minorities too. So there was Muslim I had Muslim friends, Sikh friends, and it's a beautiful mix. So it was starting to then conform and come together. As we grew older, we recognised so we were always known as the Asian kids, you know, the but we had each other's back kind of thing. Not to say we had any animosity against anyone else. It was more. It's a sense of belonging. You know, I recognise, I recognise that we stand out, we're different, and we want, we want to hold each other. We want to hold each other, to own it. If we were going to wear something different to school, then we were going to own it together, rather than secluded on the side. So, yeah, those form of subtle. It's very nuanced, though, isn't it? It's subtle. But that was there. When I came to architecture school. It was diverse as anything. Okay, I was stepping into London. I studied in the heart of London, at Westminster, you know, I lived in Baker Street. So it was a it was in one of these prime location spots where tourism was around me caught constantly. But through architecture school, we kind of again the minority, like the ethnic minorities, came together, Yemeni, Somalian, Nigerian, we all kind of came together, Pakistani, Bangladeshi. It was beautiful mix, which we then learned from each other, and it and it shaped our practice and our creative thinking. But I would say we thought we were at the edge. We did. I did. When I finished, I thought I hadn't. I was at the edge. I was a brown, British, Asian woman that could maybe tap into a very white, prominent but it wasn't as easy. So which I'm, which I don't? I don't dwell on too much, because it led me to a different journey. But it for me, personally, it was a tough one to find work.

Rolf Killius 31:56
It wasn't easy. It was tough. Why?

Sheena Patel 31:59
I always felt like I was not good enough for these roles and these interviews that I was going with, you know, with pretension male so there's layers to it, right? White, pretentious, middle class men interviewing me, and I always felt like I just wasn't good enough, even though my portfolio said something else. I remember walking away from an interview in Shepherd's Bush feeling like, Oh, I've not experienced this. I've heard about it, I've read about it, but it was different to experience it, and it happened again and again, and then we kind of it was a different time, 15 years ago, so we weren't in the space that we are in today, and I'm glad we're not. But whilst I thought I was at the edge of architecture and architecture school and coming out as a British Asian woman, British Indian woman, it was a different story. And we

also didn't. We didn't know, as we were the first born generation, so as together, I don't think we, we kind of knew what this was all about. It was very layered, very layered, until now, when we talk about it, we can put some labels and some terms to this kind of behaviour. But at the time, it was a different kind of different world.

Rolf Killius 33:27
If somebody would ask you, how would you identify yourself?

Sheena Patel 33:29
I would identify myself as an Indian, British woman. My roots run deep in India, so I'm Indian first. And there's a term, actually somebody highlighted when I'm working in India. I normally would say British Indian, but actually my mother tongue is Gujarati. Those were the first words I learned at home from my grandmother in Crawley. It was very until very later, I learned English, I learned Gujarati. I learnt to eat Gujarati food with my hands. So those were those influences from Indian so I'm an Indian, British.

Rolf Killius 34:11
And how do you think other people see you?

Sheena Patel 34:14
Other people see me in a they see me as a free, spirited, creative, very different. They know me, my friends, and those who know me well enough see me as this. You know, I often get names, but they see me as a free spirited but as as very proud of being Indian. I'm very proud of my heritage. And this, this other ring, and this, this foreign kind of dialogue for being a foreigner in in my own land, doesn't kind of express that I'm a foreigner there. It's just being a foreigner is a perception about some a place in a time for somebody. So I'm the I feel like when people describe me, they see me as a, as a creative and that's how I'd like to keep my identity forever flowing. You know, there's no end to creativity, and I don't want to, I don't want any boundaries to stop that.

Sheena Patel 34:14
You mentioned the word foreigner. Did anybody hint that you are foreign or in this country?

Sheena Patel 35:17
Yeah, absolutely right. You know where? Yeah, so, ah, you know, where are you from? Is this prime question, Crawley. I was born in Crawley hospital. Oh, yeah, okay, where are you really from? You know, that is, I've been so used to that in my workplace, and I'm like, oh, what you mean is, where my ancestry is from, you know, let's just reframe the question, and then I can tell you, but I'm from Crawley. When I go to India, I'm from Crawley, and when I go to East Africa, I haven't been yet, but when I do go, I will be from Crawley, where the question is, how we want to frame it is, where is your ancestry? Because that changes the narrative completely. When you ask me about my ancestry and my cultural heritage, it's from it runs from India with with a with flair, and from Kenya.

Rolf Killius 36:16
Did you feel offended if some,

Sheena Patel 36:17
I mean, yeah, when I was younger, absolutely right. So those were, again, very subtle, subtle tones of racism. Of course, I did. I did. And, you know, I was young, and my teen dad get angry and be like, what do they mean? I belong here as much. And we didn't. Growing up in the United Kingdom, we weren't taught colonisation. We were not taught about the Empire and the effects. So we kind of had to do that independently, and study that independently, and then have conversations with our parents, our grandparents, around the nuances of colonisation and actually what impact it had on the collective. Because it wasn't individual anymore. It was on both sides. It wasn't just an India and a Pakistan community. It was a collective it still echoes today when we've got, you know, the beauty of being in London, in the UK is that you've got Indian friends and Pakistani friends. So that's the beauty of like, actually, when we sit down and we talk about it, it's a collective grief, and it was a collective behaviour. So I did feel offended. I did absolutely feel offended, but now I look at it, you know, just it's an education thing, so I won't lash out and be brash. I would just say what you really mean is, is where my ancestry is from. Because if we look at the patterns, then actually, my land was conquered by the people of this land. You may not be directly from this land. You may again have traces from other lands, but this, the people from this land had conquered, and that's why I'm here.

Rolf Killius 37:58
I'm here because you were there, because

Sheena Patel 38:00
you were there.. Yeah, I'm here because you were there. And so this idea of being a foreigner again, it comes back to a foreigner. It's about perception. It's that person's perception of you as a foreigner. Because in India, I'm considered a foreigner, right? I've they've already labelled me. They've given me a label. An NRI, you know that speaks, has this British, British accent, but she looks like us, but she doesn't speak like us. So you've labelled me as a foreigner there, which I get because I don't know how to navigate the streets, and I don't know how to haggle, and I don't know the norm you know the complexities of Indian society, even though I've been living there for the last year. But I do know how to get off the tube here, and I know how to behave, you know, like how we all get as Londoners, and that comes in. So that's my me accepting my foreignness in my home. So

Rolf Killius 38:57
you just mentioned you already worked one year in India. Can you tell us? Maybe connect you you finished with your studies, architecture. Yes, and you worked afterwards, and then, yes. How did you get to India?

Rolf Killius 39:12
Sure,

Rolf Killius 39:13
in this sequence.

Sheena Patel 39:14
So having finished architecture school at architecture school, I was very much interested in communities and engaging with communities. These are term that they like to call community development. I like to I don't feel like it should be termed as development, because the community is already existing, so actually we're engaging and learning from each other. So I want to try and take change that term. But So yeah, I was always very involved in community engagement. So I did a lot of architectural and international workshops in communities in India, Nepal, right up to the north of India, in a place called Ladakh, Kashmir, Uttarakhand. And so I was very much, and that's also how. I started to kind of be confident in speaking Hindi. Now, Hindi is not my mother tongue, but I learnt it from Bollywood film, so I'm grateful. But then, using my skills and using my time in these communities, I really brushed up my Hindi so I was able to speak fluently and articulate myself in these rural communities, so I felt like they could trust me, because that's an important so most of my practice has been around creating place, making dialogues with communities abroad, and I did a year in Canada something very similar, working with First Nation and native Canadian communities. So there was a link that these a sense of belonging for me too. So that's how my practice was shaped. Through that, I did a lot of artwork as well, writing creative creating different models, working in schools with children, and then this led me to the climate. I was very much interested in the climate, space and the land, as I've mentioned before, and I genuinely feel like the climate is about honouring the land and worshipping the land, and it's something we've kind of done through our rituals, in in the in the Hindu festivals, most of our festivals are centred around the Land and agriculture, but so I kind of wanted to look dive deeper into the spiritual meaning of this idea of land and connection. So I took took myself into a climate space where communities around forests and tribal communities, and that led me to a job opportunity in India where we plant mangroves in the Sundarbans, for example, that's my first project, and we kind of work with communities in the Sundarbans. For the Sundarbans is the world's largest mangrove forest, and it sits in the delta between Bangladesh and India. 60% is in Bangladesh, but 40% is in India. So it's a really eco it's a fragile ecosystem, and it's an ecosystem within itself. So I was able to so I took this opportunity to work with women and children in West Bengal. Now, I'm not from West Bengal. I can't speak the language. I know very little about the history, but living in working in West Bengal has made me more adverse to the region, and made myself aware of of the role West Bengal had in colonisation. It was also the gateway to the British coming. So for me, that's the kind of work I've been doing. And for the past year, I've been living and working in the Sundarbans for the last 11 months, learning the language, listening to Bengali songs, listening and reading about the literature, the political movement. You know, there's a lot that shape the state and the current state the situation is for me to then allow to go and navigate in such a complex territory. So that's what I've been doing for the past 10 months, and that really has shaped this idea of this foreigner, where, where I'd been the foreigner. Of course, I was the foreigner when I went in, but now that foreigners that

that's changed, I'm their didi. Now, you know, Didi is the term that they use as a sister, but I'm their didi. I'm theirs. I belong. I've been I've kind of been like, embraced, and they are mine too. They're my field team, and those community members are very much mine. So where I felt like a very much of an outsider when I first went there and I was like, I will never be able to integrate or gain the trust of these community members, these women, these kids, even these men, you know, they're never going to trust me. But a year later, spending a year with them in field. From everything I've done, everything in West Bengal, you know, I have gone they have these ponds. Everybody in Sunderbans have have these fishing ponds. I'm a hardcore vegetarian. I don't eat fish, I don't eat eggs, and I don't eat meat. And the diet there is very much around, you know, a very meat fish eating diet. But I've gone and gone into these ponds invested with like, you know, lizards and snakes and fish, and I've gone and done fishing with them. You know, the houses are some houses are quite rural, so they use the dung from the cows, and they kind of apply it. And I, with my bare hands, I've applied it to get that feeling of connection to the earth. I wanted to ensure that I'm with in this with them, to cutting fish, to scaling fish, I've done it all with my bare hands. I've tolerated the mosquitoes. I've seen the snakes. I've seen water water, monitor lizards and geckos have fallen on my head, and now it's just become this norm. You know, I've I've done everything I could. I've given everything my soul, my heart, my body to the Sundarbans, all in this kind of idea of honouring this landscape and the land which sits by the water. And the most important, you know, the main, the main story of the Sundarbans is the Royal Bengal tiger, which I haven't seen yet, but the spirit is very much evident. And this tiger narrative shapes your behaviour. And so that's what I've been doing for the last 10 months. Yeah.

Rolf Killius 45:29
What was the main difficulty for you? Think about it first.

Sheena Patel 45:32
Hmmm...The main difficulty...

Rolf Killius 45:35
talk about the gecko. Of course. You know what I mean.

Sheena Patel 45:39
Trust. How was I going to try? How are these people going to trust me? Because I was a foreigner.

Rolf Killius 45:48
And how did you gain that?

Sheena Patel 45:54
Huh....When I went there, I didn't think I I could. I genuinely didn't think I could gain their trust.

Sheena Patel 46:08

I had to show them that I was in it. I learned the language. I dressed according to the norm there. I didn't succumb to eating facial meat. But I was in it, you know, I rode it out in the in the heat, 40 degrees tropical. I rode it out with the mosquitoes, the isolation. I was alone in this field. I didn't have anyone with me to show them, time and time again, come up with ideas workshops, and you know that this was for the better, that I was in this to do this with them, for the betterment of their community. It was the hardest thing was get gaining their trust. And then it came to, was I able to deliver this? I had a huge responsibility. It's about designing a livelihood initiative for women and men and children in the very complex region. So it wasn't a field exercise, it was it was going to get down to the ground and you know, the kids trusted me too. I would go and do Nursery Rhymes and sing with them, and we'd dance and do workshops. And so when it gets when the innocence of those children see me as like Didi has come here to do something, what is Didi going to do? And remember, Sundarbans is a very vulnerable place too. It's vulnerable to climate change. So for me, the responsibility I had was I had to get their trust

Rolf Killius 47:53
Talking about your work, do you feel you were qualified there?

Sheena Patel 48:00
No, I didn't feel I was I don't think anybody can. No matter how much field experience you have, we can't be qualified. We don't come from these places or this land. We don't understand like, I'm here today in London, you know, and they're in getting ready for the summer, the heat, cyclones, monsoons, soil erosion, that's so how can I be qualified to deal with that? I don't think you can. You need to live there to feel it to be to be qualified to but my skill set, and I guess, my personality, my emotional intelligence, I wouldn't even say, my intellect took me through this process, my intuitiveness and the emotional resilience that I had to work in this is the most complex community I've ever worked with, in my opinion, that allowed me and also this like divine intervention from from this forest Goddess that they have Bonbibi, I felt like she gave me permission. You know, 10 months later, she was like, I trust you to do this, and I have to. I'm riding with it, and I'm holding her close to my heart to ensure that I'm able to deliver the change that I want to see, you know, as well as the change I believe

Sheena Patel 49:23
is coming. So no to answer the question, no, I don't think I was qualified.

Rolf Killius 49:29
Now, what? Nearly one year later, how you feel now?

Sheena Patel 49:33
Now, you know my last trip to the Sundalands, I was in there for three weeks. And you know when the head kind of comes up to you and says, You've done this with your heart, you know. And you can see it in his eyes, and you can see it in mine, yeah, I did. And now I don't

feel like that foreigner. I feel like I can go, I can speak my broken Bengali. And be accepted. And then again, it comes back to the perception a foreigner is a perception of the self,

Rolf Killius 50:12
right? And you continue working there?

Sheena Patel 50:14
Yeah

Rolf Killius 50:15
What is your ...

Sheena Patel 50:15
Yeah. So I'm about two days.

Sheena Patel 50:17
Yes I will..I will, head back soon in November, potentially now. I've got a bit of a break, because it'll be heat. It'll be hot. I may do a visit, check in, visit, but I'm working remotely now to develop strategies in planning and implementation tasks so we can move for a more of a holistic health model, and where we can, you know, work with health specialists. So that's my next project, whilst health project, yeah. So that requires me to kind of be a bit more grounded and, you know, make a plan of action and then invite experts from regions who have worked in the Sundarbans. So I'm still very much involved in the mangroves and the planting and the storytelling of the Sundarbans. Every day, the Sundarbans comes in conversation for a little while. I'm just not physically present in the field, but doesn't mean that I don't speak to the team regularly, so they know that she's still in the picture. But this was the idea now, is just to give them, the community and the field team, some tools to work without me. So then we have a safe and a clear exit strategy, because that's what we want to do. We want to ensure that the community can just start standing on their own feet, and we kind of guide them through. So that's where I'm at now, before I hand over fully, I've kind of just taken a step back, and then we'll that's the best way, I believe, to kind of hand hold from afar, and then let them ride.

Rolf Killius 51:53
And the organisation you work for is an NGO?

Sheena Patel 51:56
Its a project developer, yeah, VNV - Value Network Ventures. So we're a project developer that plant sort of trees. So we primarily look at projects to offset carbon for investment. So that's what we do as a company.

Rolf Killius 52:15
Do you think the people need such an NGO?

Sheena Patel 52:20
The people in the Sundarbans need these kind of, this kind of project development and infrastructure, because that investment comes, unfortunately, the world we live in, you know, the grants and the fundraising strategies, it's not enough to cover such a vast and it's through this kind of, these kind of project development, we can then there's more of a flow of cash and a larger infrastructure project that can happen because these investment involve but there's also this idea of planting. So we're at the same time these plantation happening. So we're preserving and reforesting our planet at the same time. So in this region, the expertise is required, but then it's the idea is to Up skill and hand these expertise over so they can then fulfil it themselves.

Rolf Killius 53:13
You're also avid traveller, isn't it?

Sheena Patel 53:16
Yes, yes, of course. I have spent a lot of time travelling. I've travelled most of the south east region and India. I've done north to south . Yeah, I guess after architecture school. You know, this identity, this quest for identity. Who am I? You know, as we do, you know, go for these journeys to go find ourselves, whatever that may look like. So I went to most, you know, explore Southeast Asia, the Middle East, a little bit of the Middle East, Central America. And those kind of my travel has shaped a lot of my practice too. You know, that's kind of influenced the way that I practice my work and write and contribute to these creative programmes and creative jobs that come my way. So travel has played a huge role in in shaping me as well. Travelling has given me freedom and knowledge and curiosity, that there's a world beyond the four walls that we live in and travel around allows for experience, and travel allows for you to feel. And then in travel, yes, you question the identity, but when you're travelling, the foreigner doesn't come too much, because you know you're you're flowing through that space, you know. So it's not as it doesn't hit home as much as if somebody were to ask me where I was from in the UK, because we're all in these nomadic spaces. We're travelling, and we're moving constantly, so you feel actually at home when you're travelling. Thing, because everybody's in the same boat.

Rolf Killius 55:04
And previously, you've also involved in a community organisation called Subrang Arts. Can you talk about that?

Sheena Patel 55:09
Oh, yes, Subrang came through, you know, again, by the community in Crawley, they'd done some work in Crawley. And initially, I was very much interested in henna art. So I was sort of involved who it was through henna, my love for applying henna and and we did some workshops, and that led to these questions, and I had done my thesis on identity and sense of belonging. So, you know, Lata, Aunty, who's who kind of looks after Subrang has kept me in mind. And I kind of conveyed to her, I remember when 'Gujarati Yatra' was done and I went to see the exhibition, I was like, Oh, I wish I was part of this, you know. And she always said

that she'd keep me in mind. She wasn't aware that I had this kind of interest. And then, through the years, we've done a lot of work and collaborated on lots of projects -

Sheena Patel 56:01
'Routes and Changes'. Was looking at the patterns and migration from a Gujarati community. And then 'Kalasetu'looked at building bridges, cultural bridges, between the wider Indian diaspora. And we sort of, we had tangible results from that, with Batik and silk painting. So I through that, I managed to work with Kinetika - a studio in Purfleet, just outside of London. So I did some work with them for a few years, trained as a batik artist. That all came through Subrang , and then through Subrang, we've done lots of and we did ' Exodus' as well. So there's lots of work and creative. This is where my creativity can come out as well. And this, again, ties up to who I am, because this is also who I am. I want to, kind of, I want to be my own little archive of the information of my my entire culture heritage, you know, I want to be a walking, talking archive. So, yeah, working with Subrang has been a delight, and it's reassuring to see that there's a platform for these kind of opportunities, and particularly artists and like myself, where these there is a platform, but we can kind of be in a round table and have a conversation, because they're all these feelings and emotions are internally bubbling. We just need a space, an outlet. So we've done some amazing work together. So yeah, and we continue to

Rolf Killius 57:28
Question regarding this society here right now, there was a discussion about the impact of the Windrush generation and generally, about issues of colonialism and colonialism, and how we deal with that. Does it somehow, is it important for this, this discussion, for you, this discussion?

Sheena Patel 57:53
I think yes, it's important. It's important to be aware and to understand the sacrifices that have been made, but I can't, I don't think we can continue to use that as a victim card, you know. I think we need to understand it happened, and we need to, I wouldn't say, move on and get over it, but integrate with it, you know, rather than pointing fingers. Because if we're going to do that, we're going to get into the same rat race, you know, again and again. I think it's a time, and we are in a very we're in a crucial time now where we need to educate ourselves. And I'm not, I'm saying to every, you know, Indian diaspora or Asian diaspora, understand your heritage and the sacrifices that were made and read up about colonisation, because it was a collective grief that we're all grieving. And we need to shed those layers together. We need to retain what happened and understand it, but we need to move on from it. We need to kind of integrate into it, and that's where I'm saying. We can do that through lots of different modalities, through art, music, storytelling, theatre, workshops, and, you know, of course, the food. We can host discussions and have have discussions around this, this topic. It's it runs deep. It's deep, it's visceral. It's in the collective. It's in the body. But I'm saying we can still we live in a place, in a society now that allows us to express it. So let's express the beauty of it, as well as being aware this is where this is stemmed from. So I'm all for it. I'm just saying let's creatively put it in a container and have a conversation about it,

Rolf Killius 59:41
What do you think about the future? It could be a personal side, or it could be general side. What do you feel?

Sheena Patel 59:48
Well, I'll take a personal side. I guess the future could be a very diverse community, and these threads that are woven together, and a new tapestry and a new history has come out of what's going on. And I want to be part of it. I want to be part of this new history, this new dialogue, weaving these threads from different parts of be it India or the world. I want to be part. I want to weave a new rug together, and in that rug and that tapestry, these fragments of my mother's memory, my father's story, and my grandmother's recipe, and that is this, this, this foreign way of looking at how you want to see me, but that's what I want to do. I also want to tell you about, you know, India and and through like my experiences, but I also want to hear yours. How was it for you? I want to hold space, and I want to hold a container for you, and I can't do that if I keep continuing to talk about me. So let's weave it together. So that's how I see it, on a personal front, and that's what I want to do.