

Interviewee: Vipul Bhatti

Interviewer: Lata Desai / Rolf Killius

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SUMMARY

Vipul Bhatti, a South London resident with a diverse background in financial journalism, digital storytelling, and user research, discusses his multicultural heritage. His parents, originally from East Africa, faced racial discrimination in 1964. Vipul explores his Gujarati ancestry, community connections, and the impact of colonialism on his identity. He emphasizes the importance of storytelling, particularly in Kathak dance, and the role of food in cultural expression. Vipul critiques cultural appropriation and the lack of recognition for Indian classical dance. He advocates for empathy, equity, and the need for inclusive narratives in society.

Outline

Vipul Bhatti's Background and Family History

- Vipul Bhatti introduces himself as a financial journalist turned digital storyteller and user researcher.
- He grew up in South London with parents from East Africa, specifically Nairobi and Zanzibar.

- Vipul's father arrived in 1964 and faced racial discrimination with signs reading "No blacks, no Pakis, no dogs, no Irish."
- His grandfather and great-grandfather were born in Gujarat, India, and moved to East Africa for entrepreneurial reasons.

Community Connections and Cultural Practices

- Vipul discusses the Gujarati community in Nairobi and how they maintained cultural connections through functions and weddings.
- His grandfather passed away in 1949, and he knows less about their experiences but believes they came for entrepreneurial reasons.
- Vipul's mother's side had a cinema in Nairobi called the Liberty cinema, which influenced his love for film.
- He speaks about the respect and authority local East Africans had in Indian households, reflecting a non-hierarchical and respectful community.

Personal Experiences and Identity

- Vipul shares a story about his father and uncle being homeless in 1964 and being helped by an elderly Jamaican man.
- He reflects on the common struggles faced by different ethnic groups and how it shapes his identity.
- Vipul mentions his connection to Freddie Mercury through their shared roots in Zanzibar.
- He emphasizes the importance of storytelling in his family and community, which connects people through shared human experiences.

Identity and Belonging

- Vipul discusses the complexity of his identity, being of Gujarati ancestry but also part of the East African community.
- He reflects on the question of identity and how it evolves over time, influenced by different stages of life and communities.
- Rolf Killius asks about Vipul's sense of belonging, and Vipul responds that home is not a physical space but a state of being content with oneself.
- Vipul talks about the constant questioning of identity and how it can be a spiritual and psychological journey.

Challenges and Reflections on Identity

- Vipul shares his experiences of being questioned about his identity and where he belongs.
- He reflects on the importance of values, beliefs, and empathy in defining who he is.
- Vipul discusses the impact of colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy on his understanding of history and identity.
- He mentions the significance of the Kohinoor gem and how it symbolizes the erasure of South Asian contributions in British history.

Activism and Social Justice

- Vipul talks about the rise of activism and how people are speaking up for social justice on various platforms.
- He shares an experience at a diversity and inclusion event where he questioned the lack of discussion on racism.
- Vipul reflects on the importance of lived experiences in addressing issues of inequality and exclusion.
- He discusses the challenges of being an activist and the need for more inclusive and equitable spaces.

Cultural Expression and Dance

- Vipul talks about his journey into dance, starting at the age of 25, and his experiences at the London Contemporary Dance School.
- He reflects on the spiritual and social aspects of dance, particularly garba, and how it connects people through collective movement.
- Vipul discusses the duality of being British and South Asian and how it influences his approach to dance and design.
- He highlights the importance of representing Indian classical dance in contemporary art and media.

Food and Cultural Identity

- Vipul emphasizes the importance of food in his cultural identity, being vegetarian and vegan for many years.
- He shares how food connects people and creates bonds within his family and community.
- Vipul reflects on the significance of flavors and preparation in food, which are central to his cultural expression.
- He mentions his preference for thali, a traditional Indian meal, and how it represents the diversity and richness of his heritage.

Language and Identity

- Vipul discusses his proficiency in Gujarati, Hindi, and Swahili, and how language shapes his identity.
- He reflects on the poetry and sentiments expressed through different languages and how it influences his physical and emotional expression.
- Vipul mentions the use of Sanskrit and Braj Bhaasha in his Kathak training and how it adds depth to his dance practice.
- He emphasizes the importance of language in preserving cultural heritage and connecting with his roots.

Future of Identity and Belonging

- Vipul reflects on the future of identity and belonging, emphasizing the importance of seeing each other as human beings.
- He shares his experiences in a master's program in cognition and computation, which highlights the commonalities of human brains.

- Vipul discusses the challenges of inequality and discrimination, both historical and contemporary, and the need for empathy and understanding.
- He concludes by expressing his hope for a future where people are valued for their humanity and not defined by their differences.

FULL TRANSCRIPT

Vipul Bhatti 0:12

So I am Vipul Bhatti. I live in South London. My background in terms of career, I started out as a financial journalist. I then did a dance degree at London contemporary dance school. It was a South Asian strand where so I combined Kathak with the main subject, which was contemporary dance. But it's not just dance in terms of technique. We did a lot of contextual studies. So we looked at dance history, choreology, improvisation. But then my career went into digital storytelling, through journalism, financial journalism, and then to user research, so looking at human behaviour when products and services are used. I grew up in South London, and both my parents are from East Africa. My both my parents were born in Nairobi, we're of Gujarati ancestry. My mother was - My father was raised in Nairobi and my mother was raised in Zanzibar. My father came in 1964 which at the age of 22 and my mother came in 1971 it was really interesting in 1964 because when him and my bapa, my father's older Uncle, brother, came here. They were looking for a room, and they wherever they went, there were posters on each available houses which had the poster reading, 'No blacks, no Pakis, no dogs, no Irish'. And it's interesting that the same kind of sentiments are here today in 2025 even though they arrived in 1964, my grandfather, my grandmothe, grandmothers came from Gujarat, which geographically is North West India. But my grandfather was much older when my father was born. So my father is the youngest of eight. But going back, if I calculate my my dad and my grandfather, my father's father was would have been born around 1877 and on my mother's side, that would mean my great, great father, grandfather, would be born around the same time, but they went to Zanzibar, and so inland and coastal or Islanders. So I think that's quite interesting, and there's so much to talk about, because Zanzibar was a lot more multicultural, a very influential significant trading space. But also Nairobi, there was a much more of a Gujarati community. And when my, when I as I grew up in this late 70s and the late and across the 80s, we were very much part of our Gujarati community from Nairobi, and so how functions were organised and how weddings were held, it was all about maintaining the same kind of community connections and relations. So whether it was a sports day or Christmas or a wedding or a Diwali function, the same community from East Africa would gather in north, north London. So my grandfather, my dada, had passed away in 1949 and so I know less about my, their their experiences, but, but even all my, even my Nana, we didn't really talk about how they came to where they did, but I would guess that it was for entrepreneurial reasons. I guess you know that how the how you could travel via boat from north to from Gujarat to East Africa. So the kind of socio I would guess socio economic reasons, and so I don't know about the those journeys that were made and the decisions behind them, but I think what is interesting is that the same community relations and support that travelled with them. So whether they came from, they came from Jamnagar, and then they went, whether they went to East Zanzibar or Nairobi, those community relations were very much part of daily life. And also, I think which

would I would, I would be quite interested to learn about to go from India and then go to East Africa, and how did they integrate themselves with locals, local black East Africans. Interesting fact about my mother's side, my mother's Nana, they had a cinema in Nairobi. It was called the Liberty cinema. And I think that's really interesting, that one of a cinema. And this is probably why I love film as well, but how people gathered and how they dressed up. It was a it was a really fascinating way of actually seeing films and and the kind of cultural representation of what cinema provides. But more recently, I do speak to my parents about how they how they would gather as families, as communities, how they will celebrate other people's religion, religious festivities, festivities. So one of the interesting things I'm quite drawn to is the relations Indian Gujaratis had with local East Africans and how they engaged. And from what my understanding is, it was on socio economic that local African Kenyans were were working in the houses of Indians and in our household, the way I interpret it, that it was much more there was it was a lot around respect, and they and Kenyans had almost authority and a say in how households were run and they were respected. And for me, that tells me that about my my family, specifically, that we saw each other as people and being non hierarchical about it. And it's actually quite fascinating, again, that how I was raised when my father came in 1964 him and my bapa, they found themselves homeless one win one in the winter of 1964 and in those days, the snow was really heavy, and as they were homeless, they were crying because my father was 22 and my uncle was 24 and they were lost. They had one coat between them. They were freezing. They didn't know where to go, and it was an elderly Jamaican man who said to them, 'boys, why are you crying?' And my my uncle and my father goes, they were kicked out of the house they were living in at after a week, and this elderly Jamaican man said, 'you can, I can rent you a room in my home.' And I think it was again, going back to the whole thing about these posters. Where, Where It says, 'No blacks, no Pakis, no, no dogs, no Irish'. It was you. You saw each other as your the experiences you had by being discriminated yourself when you saw someone else, that word was struggling, you saw your own respective story and challenges and struggles in in someone like them. And I think I'd like to think that's part of my own identity as well, and I see here the kind of same common stories from how my mother was raised in Zanzibar, and they in there in the road. They lived in - the Bulsaras, Freddie Mercury lived in the same street. And I'll tell this story now that when he passed, my Nana Nani went to his parents house to offer their condolences, not because he was Freddie Mercury, not because he had passed from AIDS or HIV. He was a son of Zanzibar. He was a son of the Bulsaras, and therefore he was the son of he was their son as well. And my father, my grandfather, told me this much, much later in in life, and it and I think what's going back, I think it's these, these stories that I think are very much associated with my own south asianness, that when we used to meet as in as a family or through community, we shared stories. And it's the same oral tradition that we have in the South Asian classical dance I do it, which is Kathak, which derives from the term kathakar. We are storytellers. And it's through storytelling where I think, where we connect, we become, we connect and build a bond through humanness. So whether it is the storytelling of Ramayana, and I was told this, I didn't read about it. And then, you know, through cable TV, you see the story, but it's, it's the whole thing about the human experience of someone that has lived something, and they share that, I think, and it's the, it's that oral tradition, I think. So it was just so rich, and I'm glad that was part of my childhood. So when we met, whether, whether whatever the function was, or a family religious ceremony, we connected by storytelling or and I think this is what I'm trying to do more so with my parents as they get older, to tell me what would what was childhood like in the 1950s or what were they told by their elders? So the storytelling, the voices, the experiences of what they heard, they experienced, and and is still continued and and through me, because I believe I am, we are all custodians of of of lives lived before us. So my story is

not just doesn't start the day I was born. My story starts many generations before me. And I think it's such a sacred thing to hold that when when I'm asked about my identity, my identity is not just me, my identity is which is firmly rooted in the past and and the and all those people and all their life experiences that they lived got me to where I am.

Lata Desai 12:34

How do you identify yourself? As an Indian?

Vipul Bhatti 12:39

It's really interesting. I'm of Gujarati ancestry, but I also part of my story is also in East Africa, but I'm born and raised here. And this is the interesting thing. I don't know how to answer that, because a lot of my life, or our lives, goes through different stages and how we see the world and how we understand the world, we question who we are. I guess it's, I guess that's the why, the question of what Shakespeare asked to be or not to be, you know, we are or we're not, and what is that? And then it goes to like, you know, which community do we belong to? Now, I'm in my late 40s. I'm going to be soon in the club, or 50s when I was younger, whatever the community I connected to. So it's either the dance community or the journalist community. When I was working in the NHS, it was all about health care. So it's, I think we're made up of, I guess, like a Venn diagram. You know, there's so many parts of our lives that overlap. So in the moment, I like to think I'm of everything, but I'm also none of them. And it's quite interesting where I am in that actual moment.

Rolf Killius 14:23

Did you ever come across people who question your being here in the right place? Are you foreign? Where do you really come from?

Vipul Bhatti 14:25

One of the other questions, interesting, I mean, interesting, the questioning of identity, and maybe there, that's why there could be a confusion that when you are asked that question, who are you? You know there's also that follow up bit, where are you from? Where do you belong? And then you are told . Where you are from, then you are told where you belong. And so we can the confusion can arise that when this constant state of being lost and being found, and I think it then becomes maybe a spiritual thing, that if I am content in who I am, whatever that is, that's where I belong and and a few, several years ago, I was going through different challenges, and I came to a realisation that home is not a physical space, and I think so. Yes, I have been questioned in the past that or even told that you are Indian or, how do you? How? How do you? Why do you identify yourself as being East African, or you are British, but you're not British. You I'm I've been, I've been born and raised and lived most of

my life in in England. So am I English, and so is this constant, constant questioning of identity, and so within myself, I know I can be perceived as many things, but who I am is who I feel every day. I'm a son, I'm an uncle, I'm a brother, I've been a grandchild, I've been a friend, I've been an artist, I've been a colleague. I've been a stranger. We're all these things all the time in every single microsecond. I don't think I should also do the heavy lifting to explain who I am, because also who I am is also based on my values, my beliefs, empathy. You know, I believe in I don't understand food poverty or child poverty. I get angry about different types of inequality, whether it's gender race, you know a the CO notion of caste system, and you know what shade or brown I am? Am I dark or am I fortunate to be, to be this, this colour I could be lighter. And it's interesting is that identities cropping up because someone's probably trying to understand who they are, and how do they relate to yourself? So it can be a psychological thing, an insecure thing, finding yourself like which social spaces are you in? I have been asked by other South Asians about who I am, because you know, if you find yourself in a in a surrounding where you are a minority of being South Asian, and you're in a mostly white space. I know from one experience I went into it, I think it was a social, professional environment, and there was another South Asian guy amongst other in a group of white individuals and the conversation, what I did not feel that that individual became very territorialized, that you know what these are, my white people, you can't come in, and that that level of appeasement that I see that, you know, when you are the minority, you want to fit in.

Rolf Killius 19:06

And did you, but still, you live in Britain, which is a dominant white country. Did you feel that you have our that anybody gives you a feeling and you're not really belong to this place.

Vipul Bhatti 19:22

I think with ageing, one thing I realised a few years ago that ageing is hard because when you find your own voice, I mean, your voice is always there, but when you find your voice, that's saying I know what my boundaries are, and it's interesting the word boundary, because when you're a kid, and I grew up in and still am in a very liberal, open Hindu household, i. Is the story of Ramayana. You learn what the word boundary is through the term of a Lakshman Rekha. And as you get older, you begin to understand what does that Lakshman Rekha mean to protect yourself from what is out of your space, but also to hold and protect yourself and not giving away yourself and being who you are when you and being true to yourself. And I think more and more, I think I can openly say that I'm more and more angry, even though, if you met me or speak to other people, I can, I come across. I'm told I'm I'm calm and calming. But the anger comes from that the education system, pre internet, uh, present was you were you were told what history is and what the industrial revolution is and was, and how it is a momentum and effort, a symbol of social economic progress and development. As you get older, you realise that was a very glorified narrative by the person, and I say person, in a very broad, pluralistic way of what they wanted they how they wanted to represent their identity, whilst now I am I, someone like me, will be questioned or told what my identity is. So when we look at colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy, wealth distribution, historical GDP. GDP also looking at how was India alone impacted by the Raj, if you call it that, and even when

we had the passing of the late Queen Elizabeth. I remember this really significant, I thought it to be significant, where the hearse her coffin as it was going down Pall Mall, and they had the crown there, and they described the pearls, and I think it was a sapphire. I can't remember. They described every single so many parts of the crown, but there was one particular gem that they did not mention, and that was the Kohinoor. So even if we take that as a story, that story was excluded because and that told symbolically, that tells me so much, because everyone knows the story of the Kohinoor, but that told me one thing, that we even though we are the gem of the crown, but our shine is not spoken about. Oh, I didn't really study a colonial history. And I think that's the interesting thing. If we look at the education system, that you are taught, and you are taught what you are learnt and and the I went into Croydon library more recently, and it's it, we, we, you were only told what to talk learn on the subjects you were given. And I think growing up more and more, especially with with social media, more and more and more stories are coming out, and I'm reading a book at the moment, and unfortunately I can't remember the author's name, but it is called the Raj at war, and in the early pages, there's this really interesting line where It says that Great Britain, or Britain did not fight or participate in World War Two. It was the British Empire and and I think that's the thing you know, that even in in this great story, because that's how it's now told, as a story that the fight, the great battle, is only told by through whiteness and now and now other stories of the Armed Forces, from the Caribbean, from Africa, from South Asia and in this case, India. How were lives impacted, and not lives just by those from the armed forces, but through health care, nurses, doctors, the postal network, even farmers going even the book I'm starting. I'm at the beginning of the book, but the book also talks about people in different levels of society. It even talks about how sex workers were impacted in India by the war, but also how the social economic impact on war and the great Bengal famine. And these stories are only coming up more and more now. But what is interesting is that we are telling the stories, but who is listening? And again, it goes back to and if you look at intergenerational trauma, that the PSTD is still there, we just don't know it there. And it's when we when we become informed, and when we learn about our stories, it becomes very triggering. And so therefore, if we look at what we've inherited, we've inherited different things in terms of art, culture, food, how we write, how we what words we use, how we tell stories, but we've also inherited trauma and disease and illness. We've also inherited how we are quiet, how we hide, how we appease. There's so many things what we've inherited even even now, when we're looking at the time when we were we're looking at the story of Windrush. And now it's interesting. I went on the overground and which is now the Windrush line, or different parts of it, and I did have a conversation that said, Why does it have to be called Windrush? My question is, well, why not? And this is the interesting thing, is that the same now to the last few weeks, how Grenfell has was impacted, and now it's like, well, the only way to read, to to to go to progress is like, you just get rid of the Building. And I think that is in a very I uh, it's much more than a removal that you take down a building, but that building talks about how many lives were suffered, had were devastated, how many lives as an impact, as a result, are being impacted, and the only way to address it is through an imperialistic act to remove it. Because if you if you remove it, then you take away the story. And I think that's what we have seen after so many years, that we naturally become activists when we start telling our stories. And I think that's the then we go back to the that big question, what is your identity? Who are you? And and I am one person, but I'm not made of one, one person. Stories speaking earlier on about inherited trauma.

My mother's side are much more vocal, and also, actually my dadi she was also very vocal, this strength that that came from this generation that we they spoke up, they were fearless, they they refused to hide or be hidden. And I think maybe that is within me, but then being born and raised here and being again questioned quite repeatingly, not, not, not even when I was younger, or throughout my my educate, educational life, and then through work, you can be asked who you are, but you Do not know the actual intention behind the question? And it's and I think it's even more now that when I realised what the inherited trauma is of how I've held in my I've suppressed my voice. So therefore I'm not, I wouldn't be as outspoken as I could be, or as I am now, and I and this, it takes me back to a really interesting Converse event I went to. It was looking at diversity and inclusion at the workplace, and it was an LGBTQ plus space, and on the panel, you had five people, all who were selected to speak about diversity and inclusion in the workplace, and just by observation, if we just look at it as data, as what these people represented, they were all white, four white men, one white woman, talking about diversity and inclusion in the workplace. And it did not sit right with me, and I don't like to speak, especially to stand up and and speak through a mic. And but then I could not. And then I started preparing a script. Then I asked for the mic, and I got the mic and and then I say, said, Can we please speak about the R word racism? And then my question looked at if as it was the workplace, looking at product design, development, management, strategy, customer experience, everything that makes the workplace. And there was silence, and no one knew how to answer that. And then one of the panellists said to me, I don't know about your experience, but that's a very, really kind of crucial thing, of that, that that moment that someone can talk about diversity and inclusion in the workplace, but hadn't had the experience of being othered, but yet was given the opportunity to speak. And then there was a woman in the audience who happened, I don't want to assume her identity, but she, I think she was South Asian, from what I remember, she said, Well, look at me. Look how I am. And it goes back to what was. She spoke on their behalf. She protected them. And it was that level of appeasement that actually shut down what I was trying to address, that when a person who is white doesn't have the answer, another person of colour who who has been afforded opportunity, will speak on their behalf, rather than actually address things, the things like that are colonial, imperialism, patriarchy, whiteness, that not just I experience as an individual, but the actual whole thing about workplaces, product development, strategy, sales, you know, it all looks goes back to people, so therefore these places are not inclusive and equal and diverse, because you have a chosen people speaking about them who don't have lived experiences. Interestingly, all the other people of colour came up to me, and the only one trans white woman came up to me, saying, thanking me for the for the asking that question. But then what was interesting after that was that there was a Southeast Asian guy who came up to me said thanking me, saying that was a really important question that you raised, but I would be careful if I was you, because if you talk about racism, you will find yourself being excluded.

Rolf Killius 34:36

So are you saying? Not much has changed,

Vipul Bhatti 34:42

and that was in 2023 and I think that's the other thing, is that even when we look at the political landscape right now, there's almost there is a removal of DEI policies, which we are now seeing. But. And it's it's scary, but also what we do see is the rise the emergence of activism, whether you march or not, but whether you how you put a post up on Instagram or Tiktok, people are speaking up for other people. There is a great kind of mobilisation from micro to macro, and that is powerful, because people are speaking for with for other people, how, how we make food, what was the ingredients, you know? How did people, you know, stories of, let's say Martin Luther King. He's, he's kind of inspiration, or Rosa Parks and people from different parts of the world are were inspired and by other people, and now we are becoming informed by history, but we are also making our own stories, and and I think that is powerful.

You're also yourself. You're a professional dancer in two traditions. That's it. Do you feel in this area there's rather a change? Or is the same as everywhere else?

One of the interesting things of going to conservatoire or contemporary dance school, and having learnt Kathak, there more is that you where you find yourself within a system. And it was very, it was reflecting. It was a very kind of, even though it's a creative space, an artistic space, but it was also, like many spaces, very bureaucratic, and had its own kind of imperialistic mechanisms of how of it was functioned. But more so now I in my in my body, how I create, curate work, whether it is using the lexicon of kathak or the kind of ideas which are which could be defined as contemporary, I kind of see the same kind of duality of being British, British, South Asian that, you know, I find patterns and themes and architecture and detailed and minimalism and geo geometry. So I use the same kind of stylistic qualities from both, and I think that's probably my own approach to design. I would think that now there is a lot more. There's a wider representation of dance and dancers and arts and and curiosity and storytelling through there's a lot more, I think, styles and of dance and movement coming together where there is an equality of the artist. And I, and I think that's remarkable, because even now, when I look at when I'm on my Instagram feed, I mean, I'm drawn to the indigenous movement expressions of, let's say, in certain tribes in Ethiopia. But when I then, I'm also looking at tap dance in the golden age of Hollywood cinema. But then you also see what people in different parts of Africa are dancing. And I think that is what is, I think, so beautiful that we can be informed by movement and dance. And I like to think that is what is beautiful, because there's a lot more integration and curiosity and questioning that. How can we bring this kind of interweaving of of humanness, which is movement, non verbal? And I think that is beautiful. And it's not also age led or bound or, you know, you don't have to. I think one thing I've also seen the way I've seen, I think it's a German Bollywood, a German. White artist. She is just fascinated by Hindi cinema and and she is an incredible artist. And then there is, I think he's East African guy, a black guy, and he lip syncs to to Hindi songs. And he does it so well that you would think that's his expression, because it is. And I think that's the most amazing thing that we are exchanging and sharing and celebrating as artists. And I think that's what art and artists can do, and should do is that we can find ourselves in someone else's identity and expression because it resonates with something within us, and we might not be able to understand it, but it's something that we feel, and what we feel Is, is the humanness.

Rolf Killius 41:01

So you wouldn't use the word cultural appropriation, but

Vipul Bhatti 41:10

I think that's in terms of cultural appropriation, that's a big thing. I think it's context as well, that if you, if you are saying, Oh, that it's when, one thing I find quite grating, when, when, when we gesture as in screwing in the light bulb that is cultural for me, is cultural appropriation, because what is that? Surely, it is this in the opening of the Lotus. And what does this signify? It is not just a flower blooming, but it's the release of a fragrance. It's the velvetiness of its leaves. It can be about the pollination, pollination of of a bee into the nectar, but yet it is reduced to how South Asian or Indian people move that all we do is screw in light bulbs. So even there it is the kind of imperialism that we are people that have to take, we have to be the ones that are screwing in the light bulb. And that thing is that it comes to that, you know, our expression in terms of dance, is reduced, minimalized to when I've been told so I do Indian classical dance, or one of them, and they will say, well, is that Bollywood dance? And it's like, well, no, it's not. If I was to equate it to anything, let's say we look at ballet. And I think that's the other interesting thing, that even in the in the classical dance world, that there's also a hierarchy that if you are doing, if you have, if you are ballet trained, that you know you have a different you know you have the heightened, enhanced level of virtuosity and athleticism. But if you're doing Indian classical dance, where you don't, and I think that's the sad thing, is that the intelligence, the way we curate and make work, how our rhythm system, how we express, how we can isolate different parts of our our our anatomy, how we express through the face that is highly intelligent. It is highly expressive. It is highly athletic and virtuosic. And it is a dance where you can do through your entire lifetime, whether you are a younger dancer or starting dance in your 60s, or you are an exponent that has done dance throughout your life, and you're in your 80s, it's within you, and I think it doesn't get the same level of respect and recognition as ballet does, and I think that's the sad part, and I think maybe that's what we should be speaking up more about, and we and that's the thing is, even in Indian even in Hindi cinema, that's all I know of. I'm not going to say all of Indian cinema, specifically Indian Hindi cinema, there is almost an absence, a deprivation, of Indian classical art, dance music is not the same. We only have or the the detail of Indian classical dance is not there. We there's almost like to emulate a western style, which is is good as well, but it's like that's all we should be doing, rather than, why not have more Indian classical dance? Because it can be contemporary. It can be innovative. It is equally expressive and it's, it's, it's sad that we're not showing this more because it's part of our storytelling. It's part of our physical, non verbal identity.

Lata Desai 45:37

Let me ask you one question, going back to your How did you get into dance? Was it for you to a quest for you to find your Indian identity through kathak?

Vipul Bhatti 45:48

hmm...So I came to dance. I think it's quite strange. I didn't dance until I was 25 but then again, that's the other interesting thing about being Gujarati, because dance doesn't just happen to you. Every year you would go to novratri, you know, so it is this kind of social aspect or identity of your life, is that for nine days, you are doing garba, and it's, I'm I'm fascinated, drawn to garba because it's a social dance. It's, what does it mean? I think it's a harvest dance. I'm not entirely sure, but that's what it was told. We are looking at circles. We are looking at the cycle of life. We are celebrating nine goddesses over Nine Nights, who each represent a force, a strength. And it's interesting about garba, and my observation that it is such an open dance, it doesn't matter whether you know it, excel at it, have mobile mobility issues where as you dance, but you are all part of the same cycle, the circle. So I didn't my kind of journey with dance didn't start when I went to dance school or when I went to started learning Kathak. I would say it was from a very community level. And again, the spiritual aspect of it that so my, my kind of translation of garba is that it is actually a pooja, it is prayer. It is not just a dance, because I am giving my soulfulness, and it's shared with every single person that we are dancing because we feel a joy, and there is music and there is food. So it's that kind of the spirituality of of collective movement. I think that's that's beautiful also. So I went into dance. I went to a an after party of a Bollywood film. My friends saw me dance. They said I should dance. So I started dancing. And I happened to go into kathak, and then I went to London contemporary dance school. So I learned technique and notation and dance history and biology and so many other things, improvisation. And that taught me how I see movement. I was able to look at spatial relationships. I was able to look at some things that were surreal and abstract. So the same kind of ideas that we see in art, and other things that have been other artists, that have been influenced by social, economic, political, things that they were influenced by that informed their art, minimalism, things that we do in pedestrian movement, that that and then that's what kind of I think informs that, how my how I look at dances, that I look at people, I look at spaces, how we how we gather, how we connect, isolation, individuality, commonality. So that's, that's kind of my story of dance.

Rolf Killius 49:48

I think, it's you talk about cultural expression, music and dance, which you combined with your talking about identity, which, of course, you talked about. And early on, you also mentioned the food is also a cultural expression, and it's important for you.

Vipul Bhatti 50:06

God food. So I've always been vegetarian, and I was, I don't come from a vegetarian household or family, and I was either if I ate non vegetarian food, I'd be sick, or I refused it, and then it's become part of my, my my life. And now I've been vegan for for 10 years as well, and so but I come from a family, and I think it's very common in the other South Asian families that I know of, and even our neighbours who I've grown up with, food is such a very thing that connects us as people, how we bond. And it's not just food, it's flavour, it's

preparation. I was having a conversation with, I don't know who some some people about, what does food mean? Oh, yeah, I was, I met some I went to an arts event, and I was speaking to two Caribbean guys of different generations, and we're talking about, you know, what does food mean? And we might not say the actual words, I love you, but we'll give food so and I think that there's so much affection and kindness and compassion and and food is nourishing. It's comforting. So, you know, it's the whole thing about eating together. Growing up, I was very close to my cousins, my my I grew up with my father's side more because they were all based in South London, but we would eat together four or five times a week we ate as a family. People could drop in. Our neighbours would drop in. And even when I went to North London, where my Nana and Nani lived, we everything was about food. Whatever the food was, people cooked together. They made the prepared food. They whether it was papad or athaana, there's so much around the kind of bonding experience of people connecting through food and flavour. So it's, it's, I guess it's almost like, I think if you were to say what food I in fact, I was asked what is, what is my favourite dish? And I said ' A Thali', because it is made up of so many small pots, but each kind of bowl has its own flavour and ingredient. And then you have rice, and then you have the puri, and then you have the kathor, you'd have chutney.. You have so many things. And separately, they're individual, but they come together. And I think it's as as a I think, and I still eat in a thali every single day. Um, it's my preferred way. And I eat with my hands, which is it's, I know it's just such a comforting thing to do.

Lata Desai 53:24

What about language? Does language play a big role in your identity?

Vipul Bhatti 53:31

Language? I speak Gujarati. I can speak Hindi, and I'm learning Urdu as more as well. And also being of East African rooting through my parents, there's Swahili. And it was interesting that Swahili words kind of crept in to my daily language. And then when I started meeting Indians from India, and I said that my the words that I thought were Gujarati and that which were actually Swahili. So I think that's really interesting how language is way, how you express yourself through through language. And my thinking language can be Gujarati and Hindi more. I think it's it's the kind of poetry behind it. I'm thinking much more in Gujarati more as well, and I think I do that for myself, but I think it's also about how certain words and sentiments are able to be expressed in different languages, even though I use English a lot more. But then even in my Kathak grading Sanskrit, Sanskrit would come in and Braj bhaasha would come in. We learned a kavit, a poem where, which was done in braj bhaasha, which, which is much more regional. So I think that's the interesting thing about language, that when I when it whether it is sung or whether it is spoken, how my physical expression can change.

Lata Desai 55:17

We touched upon a bit about colonial history and your perspective. If history were to visit itself, would you feel comfortable living in India, and how would you see yourself in India?

Vipul Bhatti 55:33

I don't know about living in India. I can't actually see this the scenario of living in India. And I think what I feel is a blessing and gift. And I say just because I've been in born and raised in London, is that London I feel has almost like the world in one city, that you can whether you are travelling or whether you are waiting, or whether you're in a queue, or whether in your in a restaurant that I have the Gift of having injera, or going to this vegan restaurant, which was Korean and Italian. Or, you know, I can there is this, or I can go to a Polish restaurant. Or more and more, I realise that you know how you have Polish dumplings and then you have Nepalese dumplings and you have dim sum, it's interesting what just flour and water can do and have collective different kinds of ingredients. And the, you know, the translation of what is a dumpling is, is just as personal to someone who's polish and Nepalese or or a region of China, and I think being in London, I don't, I don't think I would want to be anywhere else. Yeah, whether I am, whether I'm questioned about being Indian or not, or how what, role is my rooting in East Africa, or if I'm Gujarati, or anything else, I would say first and foremost, I am a Londoner, because it is global. It is borough led. It is individual that I could go, I can travel anywhere, but I can still be in the same place the questions of identity in the future, in the most simple way, I hope we see each other as being as human as us, because why do I say that? So I'm doing a master's in cognition and computation, and in the most simplest way, it is looking at how the brain, the mind, with the machine, processes of information to process, to understand human behaviour. And in that in that course, in that programme, I had the experience of sitting in a brain dissection, and the individual whose brain that was being dissected was someone that had passed from Parkinson's, and it was when you saw that brain, it was just some grey matter, and that was the interesting thing. And this, this thing within all of us that's in here that supports our heart, our gut and all of our other organs and all the other sensory systems, how we see, how we hear, with how we taste, how we smell, how we how we touch, that's the that's common in all of us, all human beings, and I'm not talking about animals. That's another thing, being vegan, but we have everything within us that where we can be equal, there can be more equity. We are individual brain, and that's interesting. Brains are different, but the sad thing is, how we develop vision, perspective, narrates, dictates how we connect perceive another human being. So my question is in in this, this heaviness, overwhelmingness of our world. And all this destruction and devastation dystopia. What does it take when we all say enough is enough, because enough is enough has been has happened so many times in the future. And what are we learning? And life is finite. We like to think that every day is just a day, but it is a gift, the way I mean every night I pray in my own way, and I thank the universe that I was able to wake up, and I was able to wake up, that I can wake up, I can breathe. And that's the thing is, every single person has their own struggles, and we don't know what someone is living with, challenged by and we as mental health is spoken about much more. It's rife, it's prevalent, and we have our struggles. But what holds us back as people, as a civilization, as the generation of now, what holds us back from, from from sharing, making sure that basic elementary needs are accessible to all, and I think that's what I'm challenged by, that, how do we do this? When do this? When do what will it take we have, we have the abundance of so much yet so many people in that world do not have that and and that can go from food deprivation to gender inequality, healthcare accessibility, things I cannot understand, even being of South Asian origin, that why do we still have caste

system? Why do we discriminate and question on colorism? Why do we define and tell and process in our own minds that someone has this identity because they're of a different skin tone? Why do we do this? I just don't understand that. You don't have to even have these questions. You have these questions, and it doesn't even you don't have to be of an older generation. You can be Generation Z and still have be, still be discriminating for someone's colour, caste. And why are we? Why are we categorising people by how much money they have or what job they have, or, you know, who they want to hold hands with, who, how they how they dress? Surely we should be asking questions that, do you see me as another human being? Do you see a stranger as another human being? Do you see another stranger as an equal person? So and why do we do this? Is it because there's something within us that we're not courageous enough, brave enough to confront. So the story really begins within us,

Lata Desai 1:03:53

The grandparents and even your parents. They were in a different era. They were brought up in. They had different challenges, different struggles, and how do they see you as a 14 plus year or young guy in London? Can you talk a bit about that?

Vipul Bhatti 1:04:15

So I lost my nanny last year at she was 93 and I'm I am fortunate that at the time, I was 47 and at my age, I still had a grandparent. That is a gift. And I had my dadi as well when I was in fact, I even had my great grandmother when I was 23 and that is phenomenal, because we I have their energy, and we have that we hold neurons, we weeks when we're by even, even in my genes, I have all those. All those people that lived before me, I have this their their existence within me. How would but how would they see me? I would like to think that who they were as individuals, who they were in their own humanity. I would like to think that they saw that those kind of values and beliefs within me as well, that what I live by, how I see the world, how I engage with the world, whether I am uplifted by something, or whether I am angry, or whether I feel that deep desire to protest for something or for a group of people, that is not that I'm not affected by personally, but but through our humanness, that someone else's denial of their existence irks me. I would like to think that my grandparents and their foreparents had the same beliefs. And maybe what I feel as an individual is something that I've also inherited, that that energy, that when they they and I know my my grandparents did feel that. But I would like to think that I am part of their legacy as well, that what they lived for, and along the line I was I was born. I'd like to think that they see me as a empathetic person who is questioning and hurt by other people's struggles, but also I have this fight within me that I speak up and stand up and speak out for those because I think they did that. So if there's anything I would like to think that they have passed on and that they see is that I'm still part of their spirit.