

## HARISH WARA

June 2014

Interviewer: I

Respondent: R

Interviewer: Emil Taswar

00:00 R My name is Harish Wara

00:03 I And can you tell me a little bit about your background?

00:07 R Er what would you like to know about my background?

00:09 I Where are you from?

00:11 R I was, I was born in Tanzania, East Africa, and we arrived in this country when I was sixteen, in 1974. And this was when me and my brothers, sisters and family moved to England.

00:31 I Could you tell me about life in Tanzania?

00:35 R Life in Tanzania is, was, very good. It's a tropical country, it's just like India, there weren't any bad winters in Tanzania, so very third world sort of situation. I was living in a small town called Iringa? Which is 300 miles from our capital Dodoma, and er, surrounded by wildlife – elephants, zebras, you know, lions. So whenever we are travelling outside my little town, going to the city, we'll see wildlife in town. Yeah, very nice hilly, high elevation town, so it does me good.

01:24 I Do you have any stand out memories from your childhood?

01:28 R Yeah lots of memories, lots of memories. I remember when I was a child and we use to go and climb mountains, because it is a hilly town, so use to climb mountains and then we use to go to the river where there was crocodiles and hippos and use to go picnic on Sundays. Erm we had a... It was a small town with low excitement, you know, a different life to living in the UK.

02:05 I What can you tell me about your parents?

02:08 R My parents are, were originally from India. Er they they they went to Tanzania in the days of British Colony, which was before the independence of India, and they, basically they went for, to look for a better life, you know, away from India. And they settled in Africa. My father he married in Africa, my mother was also from India, but they married in Africa, and then me my brothers, my sisters were born in Africa.

02:48 I So when did you arrive in the UK?

02:51 R I arrived in the UK in 1974, 15<sup>th</sup> of August actually, this August it will be exactly 40

years. I was there, sixteen years old, I'm the eldest in the family, so I'm sixteen years old, and then I have two brothers and two sisters, and this is when we arrived here.

03:10 I And er, what were the reasons for coming to the UK?

03:15 R The reasons for coming to the UK were simply I think, my mum and dad when they left India it was, to Africa, I think, it was to better their lives. And similarly, when the situation in Africa happened, which was in 1972, I think that everybody remembers that India kicked out thirty thousand or so British Asians. And er, you know, UK had to take a chunk of them because they were all British passport holders. So that situation sort of, you know, brought fear to some of the people who were living in the adjoining countries like Tanzania and Kenya, and they thought you know, if this could happen in Uganda, what is our safety in Tanzania, because, you know, they're all enterprising people, they'd been settled for years, and er, and my parents were holding British passports, so they thought, this is not the country where I want my children to grow up because the safety was paramount, and especially with military taking over, you know. So we were fortunate to have British passports, so they decided that, for the future, they decided we should come and settle in England because we had the rights to do so.

04:44 I Can you remember the first day that you arrived in the UK?

04:48 R Yes, I do remember the first day I arrived. We arrived at Heathrow airport and er, we had relatives here who were supposed to come and pick us up, but unfortunately, the flight that we took from Tanzania to UK was a transit flight, so we had to change planes at Nairobi, which is Kenya, and then from Nairobi we arrived to, we arrived at London Heathrow. But what happened was that some of my relatives were in Tanzania, they gave the wrong flight number, which was a flight number from Dodoma to Nairobi, and the guy was looking for that flight number at Heathrow, and there isn't such a flight coming, so when we came, there was nobody to collect us. We had their address in Birmingham, so then we said "what shall we do now?" And we were a stranger to this country you know, because first time from Africa to UK, you know. So there were a couple of black cabs outside, and we were a big family, seven of us, and we had some luggage as well, so we just hired black cabs and then came straight to Birmingham by taxi, so can you believe hiring a taxi, black cab, from London Heathrow to Birmingham. So when we arrived here at the relative, in Birmingham, the relatives said we were looking at you at Heathrow, you know, with this flight number, we couldn't find you. And my dad said, we just hired two black cabs, you know, to come here. He said "WHAT" we said "yeah two taxis" "How much is that cost us" he said. "£50 for two taxis", oh "What £50!" And he was quite annoyed, but we had to pay the money because (laughs). So at that time we had to hire those two taxis, it was quite expensive but, my dad just said "put it on my bill, we will pay for it". (Laughs).

06:44 I Can you tell me about where you first lived when you first came to England?

06:49 R Yes. We had relatives living at St Paul's Road, which is at Sparkbrook. They had a two bedroom house and two reception room, very small house, a terrace house, and er, there were already five sort of family members in living there, and we were seven family members. So we arrived at our relatives and they accommodated us for two weeks, til we found a place to live. And you know, they were so happy to accommodate us at that address. And relatively speaking, if you think about

nowadays, people have big houses, but if a guest comes here or a night, you know, they start shaking and saying “why has he come here”. But those olden times, you know, people were quite friendly you know, they did, they were happy to receive relatives and look after them. So we were living at our relatives’ house for about two weeks before we found a rented accommodation.

08:06 I Can you tell me about what your first home was like?

08:11 R Yeah. The rented accommodation was obviously not that brilliant. It was, it had second hand furniture in it you know, beds, second hand beds. The kitchen was not very good. One house, which we rented it didn’t even have a bathroom, or a toilet inside, you know, so we had to go outside, and you know, use a bucket to have a, to wash yourself. So yeah at that time the accommodation was, we thought, this can’t happen in England but yes it did. But we were use to the African standards so we didn’t mind.

08:58 I Are there any other stand out memories from when you first came to the UK?

09:04 R Yes. I think because we arrived in August, which was a summer month, so everything was hunky dory then, but as soon as winter sort of set in, I tell you, that was, that was a very difficult time for us, because we lived in a tropical country where we didn’t see snow, we didn’t see winter. So that was very hard for us. And obviously, changing the environment, come from Africa to the UK, get use to everything here was difficult, so you know, I think that winter was thing that was very bad for us. And also food wise, you know. Having lived in Africa you know, we had markets outside and there was fresh fruit straight from the farms, and here it was different you know, going to the supermarket, and obviously we had Ladypool Road we had Asian shops there, so it was ok to get all things we eat you know, like Asian foods and everything, but yes, there was a bit of difference you know.

10:26 I So what was life like as a teenager?

10:30 R Life as a teenager was good. When I arrived here, obviously in them times, you know, people had long hair and they were wearing bell bottoms and high heel shoes, so (laughs). My cousin, he was quite friendly with me, and fortunately my size was quite similar to his size, so he lent me he his bell bottom trousers, his high heel shoes, and my, the style of long hair, you know, hippy style. So at the weekends he was taking me to the Bullring, you know, nightclubs, stuff like that. So it was quite exciting actually, because in Africa, where we were living, it was quite a small town, and I had not experienced this nightclub life, you know the city life, and er, he gave me that experience. And my cousin, who he lived with, he was also involved in a music group, so he had his own band you see, and er, he use to have gigs at the weekend you know, so he use to take me. He says “Harri, dress up, and all you have to do is hold some musical instrument, you know, we’ll do all the things, you just (laughs) use this instrument”. So it was quite exciting, it was quite exciting. And er, obviously the Bullring itself, the social events, a good experience.

12:19 I And er, what were your goals as a teenager, your aspirations at that time?

12:25 R When, as I said, I was only sixteen when I came here and er, the important thing was

to educate myself. Obviously I did speak English because I went to English school there, but I wanted to enhance my education. So... Also I wanted to be in business, because my parents they had a retail shop in Africa, and my grandmother also had a grocery shop in Africa. My uncle had a wine, a liquors store in Africa, so I as a child was helping all these businesses, so you know, my dad wanted to go for a nap he'd say "stay in the shop and look after the business", so you know, I was looking after that business which was a menswear. And my grandmother, when she wanted to buy some stuff for the shop, I use to go to the Cash'n'Carry to buy it. My uncle, when he wanted to go out, I use to look after his wine store. So my aspiration was to be my own boss, but at the same time I wanted to have a bit of an education, especially English, Maths, Business Studies. So I was going to night classes to do O Levels. So I did O Levels in English, Maths, Commerce, and after that I went to do another National Certificate again, at night class in Hall Green College, and after that I went to do a degree course at Birmingham Polytechnic, but unfortunately I get married, so I didn't finish my degree (laughs).

14:14 R But yeah, the main thing was to become my own boss, and you know, the only thing that I knew was retailing, and my dad had a tailoring shop, a menswear shop, so we, I started a small business, which was alterations, and that was in Stoney Lane where the Nelson Mandela School is at the moment. So I started, it was a very small shop, which I started doing alterations and then slowly, after the Birmingham City Council they decided to knock that shop down, you know, they wanted to demolish it, so they were going to build a school there. So I closed that shop in, I started that shop in 1976, and er, in 1981 I had to vacate the premises so...

15:15 R But before then I had an opportunity to go to the British Army which was in Northern Ireland. There we were looking, it was a big camp in BallyKelly, and the British Army was looking for a guy to do alterations to for the soldiers, you know? And I had the opportunity to go there and there was a contractor who took me there, so I stayed there for about a year, over a year in the camp, and that was quite exciting, so I had a bit of an Irish experience. And I use to fly to Belfast, every three months I'd come back for a week, so that happened for a year. And in the camp we had a swimming pool there, a helipad, a sonar and all that stuff – it was quite a, quite a experience to be there!

16:17 I Can you tell me a little bit about what life in Sparkhill was like in the 70's and 80's?

16:24 R Sparkhill was a different area then. We had er, we had a lot of Irish community living in Sparkhill at that time. And er, when I opened the shop in Sparkbrook at that time, I had a lot of Irish customers who were coming to get their suits made and alterations and stuff like that. And then the Asians started arriving here so slowly I think the Irish moved out and you know the Indians and er Asians settled here. But at that time the Irish was, we had many Irish customers.

17:18 I And how have things changed since then?

17:21 R Things since then, we had big stores on Stratford Rd, you know we had Burtons – this multiple level stores – they've all gone now- and the Asians have taken over these premises you now. So it's become a predominantly Asian sort of business area, so relatively speaking I think the white community has moved out and it has become an Asian area. But yeah, at that time when we came it felt like we were in

England, but now, it feels like we are in India or Pakistan here you see, so it's (laughs) really homely now and er, it doesn't feel like this area is you know, a UK area, it's mostly Asian you know.

18:28 I Can you tell me about your customers?

18:30 R Yes, yes. As I said in the 70's you know we had lots of Irish customers and they use to love their made to measure suits. They had their own, we just kept them going... So they would come here on the weekend and they would either buy a suit or make a suit. And this Irish sort of customer, they use to work on the motorways and the building site, so they would buy an expensive suit on the weekend, and then next weekend they would be back again, and when I see them they had used their suit for work and it's full of, you know, grease and I say "you just bought this suit last week, you know, why do you have to use it at work?" And he says "I don't care, give me another suit!" And because they were earning their money building motorways and stuff like that, they just use to buy another suit. Basically they were using suits as work wear. That was quite good for me because you know if they come and buy a suit from me every week, that's business for me. It was quite funny.

19:40 R But now it has all changed, I still do have you know Irish old customers coming, but mostly it's all Asian customers, and we are very busy with alterations. Also the trend has changed now, because before it use to be made to measure business, you know, where people use to come and they were quite interested in making made to measure suit back then, but now it's all readymade instead, with the likes of Tesco, Asda, you know, Primark and Next, so people go and buy readymade suits and they come here for alterations. So the business has... although I still do lots of readymade suits, but predominantly alterations is quite busy because people have to alter their stuff. I have customers like Tas, you know, who come here for, they buy expensive gear and they come here to narrow the jeans, and stuff like that so... (laughs). The customer business has changed. And I have also you know, young kids who go out there and buy Hugo Boss, Armani stuff, they need to have them altered so it has changed in a sense. The made to measure business literally has gone out of the window.

21:00 I Are there any customers that stand out?

21:05 R Customers that stand out.. yeah yeah yeah. Like I say there's people who.. Mind you having said that, there is, there is still one Irish customer who is quite tall in height, and he occasionally comes and he asks for a suit and says "Hari, make me a made to measure suit". And he's quite tall so when I tell him "It'll cost you £1,000 to make a suit", he'll just put his hand in his pocket and say "Here's £500 deposit, you know, make me the suit!" (laughs). So er, we have that sort of business as well. But people predominantly don't you know, the Asian kids here now, their parents have, initially they worked hard and they bought properties, and the prices of properties have gone up now, so the kids are enjoying that, the benefit of these properties going up, so they are out there to buy designer clothes and they come and have it altered here so, it's good.

22:10 I So can you tell me a little bit about what your life is like now, compared to how things were fifteen, twenty years ago?

- 22:19 R My life has always been good, you know, god bless it. In...before I mean I, I had lot of responsibilities, you know, I was eldest in the family when we arrived in UK. So my father and mother, my dad didn't work when he came from Africa because, you know, he was not accustomed to life here. So I was responsible for my younger brothers and sisters, you know. So I was the one who had to really settle my family here. So after renting a few accommodations, I decided that this is er, not going to go on like this, people coming for rent every week you know, so at eighteen, when I was eighteen, I bought a house in Newton Road, which is just on the corner, you know. And er, when I went to the estate agent, prior to going to the estate agent I went to the building society where I was saving money every month, so when this house came up for sale which was £7,500 at that time, I went to the estate agent which was just on Stratford Road, Burchell Edwards, I remember the name, and I said "I want to buy this premises, I want to buy this house". And he says "Who is giving you mortgage", and I say "Abbey National Building Society are giving me a mortgage". So he straight away picked up a phone, he thought I was not serious, you know, an 18 year old come to buy a property at that time , in 1978 I think that was. So the estate agent ring Abbey National Building Society and he says, I was just listening to the conversation, he says "I've got this boy here who is putting an offer for house on Newton Road, he says and he's telling me that you are giving him the mortgage, is that fact" he said, you know. So the manager, or whoever it was says "What's the name of the boy?" He says "Its Mr Wara", he say "Oh yeah Mr Wara has been saving with us for a couple of years, we have offered him a mortgage". So that's when he took it seriously and er, he took my offer, so I bought that house when I was eighteen.
- 24:42 R So the prime responsibility was to look after my brothers, sisters, settle my mum and dad, and the first thing I did after buying the house was I sent my parents to India for six months you know, I had some money I said you know, go and enjoy yourself for six months in India. And er, after that I got married. Obviously then the responsibilities came back again to me because my children, I have two, I have a son and two daughters, so, and my, after I got married I gained the responsibility of bringing up the children, but, god bless him, they are all, they have all finished their degree. My daughter, the eldest, is in Australia, she is a biomedical scientist, and my son has got a first class in business studies and my younger daughter has just finished law studies. So, you know, I think, I think that responsibility is finishing now, so, life has been good, I have been able to support the family.
- 25:50 R I've also been a chairman of the community. I was chairman of a youth club in a Gujarati community, and er, I was quite involved with taking people out... I organise a European trip by coach, I took a coach out to Europe for about ten days, where I took people out to see Europe. We went to Brussels, Belgium, we went to Germany, we went to Holland and back again, and we also organised some big events like sports tournaments, we had a cultural show at Digbeth, you know, where we invited people with musical talent to come and perform on the stage, so a community gathering, so I was involved in that. And when I was a youth, I was chairman of the youth temple, you know, youth club, and now I am a chairman of the senior committee, which is only a temple on Walford Road, you know it is a Hindu temple, I am a chairman of that so there are various spiritual programmes, religious programmes and also sort of social programmes. We run a day centre there Monday and Tuesday where we provide hot meals for the elderly generation. Instead of sitting at home they sort of come there, we teach them yoga, some of the

people from the health organisation come there to advise them on their health, illnesses, and we give them a hot meal, so quite involved with the social activities you know, charitable sort of organisation. So yeah, life has been good, it's been full of excitement.

27:51 I Can you tell me a little bit about where you're living now?

27:55 R Yes. About sixteen...1996, eighteen years ago I moved out of Newton Road and I went to live in Hall Green, which is a couple of miles. The reason for moving out was I became a little bit prosperous so I thought that I could make a move, you know, buy a bigger house with a driveway, a bigger garden, stuff like that for the kids. So I moved out in 1996 which was the right time because my kids were younger then, they were only five, six seven years, but when they were babies they enjoyed living in Newton Road because you know, they had friends across the road, they'd just run into their houses, come back, because it was quite a good sort of, you know, environment to live, but as they went a bit older I thought now if I want them to have degrees, be educated you know, to take them out of this area, so I moved to Hall Green and I bought a house there in 96, and they had peaceful life there, you know, where the neighbours...The negative thing about Hall Green is that everybody is in their houses, the neighbours don't know you, you don't know them, so you park your car, get to your houses and you're in your garden, whereas when I was in newton Road here, all the families were, they knew each other so you could, the children could pop into neighbour's house, opposite house and you know the children would come to our house, it was a different environment. You know Hall green when I moved, it was time for them to put their heads down and study, you know. It was the right timing, and obviously, car parking was a problem, now it is easy, it was the right time to move there, you could park your car on a driveway, you know, so yes, now I'm in Hall Green.

30:02 I Can you tell me a little bit about what you do when you are not at work?

30:05 R Oh yes. Like I said, that I'm involved in temple activities, so my social life is very very busy when I'm not at work I'm in the temple, in the meetings, I'm also a member of an alliance club so there are alliance functions that are happening, and charities you know, so I'm quite involved in charity work in the temple, in alliance club, so we have meetings, we have 'do's' going on, so quite busy. A couple of times I take my wife and children to Star City to the movies you know. And then in the evenings, I am a member of a Metropole hotel so I go for my Jacuzzis, stuff like that, so I just don't know where time flies (laughs).

31:17 I Do you still have any goals or aspirations?

31:24 R Yes I do, yes. I think what I want to do now is, now that the children have finished their degrees, I would like to go for a world tour. I would just like to have a year out, maybe if I am allowed to do so by the family (laughs) with my wife of course. I'd like to travel, I love to travel, that I'd love to do. Also my eldest daughter she's living in Australia, so I'd like to spend the winter months probably there, and summer months here, so those are my ... I'd like to obviously be a grandad, you know, to play with (laughs) the children, so yes, those are, that's what I propose, so if god disposes, it would be good for me.

32:28 I And is there anything else that you'd like to add?

32:35 R Er not really I think I've said what I experienced this last forty years. This August, 15<sup>th</sup> August it will be forty years in this country, and they've been good years, and the country has been good, we've quite adapted to the life here. I have travelled a lot as well, I've... my conclusion is Britain is the best country in the world you know, the stability, there is healthcare, welfare system there is, you know the education is good so, it's been the right sort of, bless my parents, you know, they made the right move to bring us here, and er, the children have prospered, we had a good life. But I, just to add to this, I think that now, you know, the parents went from India they went to Africa, from Africa they came to UK, now my daughter is in Australia, so it looks like that once we left India we are like gypsy families, you know, moving countries to countries, so I think that the next generation which is my children now, more likely they will probably move to Australia, saying this is a new window of opportunity, so I don't know, maybe in my lifetime I will be retiring in Australia.

34:06 I Thank you very much

34:07 R Thank you