

## **RAMANBHAI PARMAR**

**16/10/15**

**Interviewer:** Urmala Jassal

**Interviewer:** I

**Respondent:** R

00:01 I What would be a good idea is if you could tell me your full name and address.

00:07 R My full name is Ramanbhai N Parmar and the address is 18 Whitland Drive, Kings Heath, Birmingham B14 5EX.

00:21 I Thank you. Could you tell me, Ramanbhai a little bit about your background and where you came from.

00:32 R I was born in India and at the age of 15 with my mother and younger brother we moved to East Africa where my father was already there. We had to join him. And after that I got educated there, did my- what do they call it? O-Levels these days. In our days it was Cambridge School Certificate. And then I became a teacher in a primary school after two years' teacher training. I got married there, worked, I have a daughter. I worked for nearly 15 years in East Africa and then I moved in '76 to Birmingham.

01:19 I What was East Africa like and what was India like? Can you remember?

01:25 I Oh certainly. East Africa was another India in other days. Now it has changed a lot. If I blindfolded you and took you to East Africa- the place I come from is Mombasa. You won't see any difference when I open your eyes, you see. There will be no difference at all. We had temples, mosques, gurdwaras. You could, actually in those days, on the currency, also the Indian languages were written down. Our Gujarati language was on the currency notes. And people talked. We got everything from India. We could buy things from India. If you moved into the market you'd find other Indian people there talking in Gujarati. And it was very much like another India you could say. Now unfortunately things have changed because a lot of people have moved from East Africa to either the UK, America or Australia or Europe.

02:29 I Describe what life was like in Mombasa.

02:35 R Oh, it was a wonderful life. When I had to leave in 76 I was in tears because we had a very cosy life. My wife was a teacher and so was I. And I was in a school so we got lots of holidays. We used to go at 8 o'clock in the morning, come back at 12:00, and have siesta in the afternoon. We went back to school at 2 o'clock. At 3:30 we were at home having afternoon tea. We had

a servant. We were middle class people. We had a servant to help us and we had a small car as well and a lot of respect from people. And the students in the school, they were very, very good. And there was no discipline problem at all. And even today, I am happier, nothing to complain against Britain but I still miss my Kenya, Mombasa especially, because of the good life. I mean I was born in India. I stayed there for so many years and now I'm here but I would say the best part was in Kenya.

03:41 I Describe your childhood to me.

03:43 R My childhood was wonderful, because my grandmother was there. I spent some time with my grandmother who lived about a few miles away from our own house. There I was the only child because her children were also in East Africa, so I was pampered. I was given all the love, and I got all the religious education from her, you see, and it was wonderful. I stayed with my mother as well, and we had a river nearby. I used to go there, play there. In the streets also we had lots of children playing about. There was no child security, no child safety problem in those days; you could just play wherever you liked to play. And it was very enjoyable. I mean these days children don't have the childhood which we had, you see. Sometimes you would come back with lots of dust on your head but nobody would complain about it. And it was a very hot place so we really enjoyed it.

04:51 I Tell me about your early teenage years and your studies before you came to the UK. What was your life like?

05:01 R Well I went to a primary school there. Then my father came from East Africa and he said, "You must learn English." Then I went to a secondary school where we learnt, besides all the subjects, English as well. And he was very particular that I knew English in quite a good way, so he gave me tuition you see. And he made sure that I educated myself properly. Because he was a shoe-maker by profession and he thought, he had lost his parents in the plague so he was very much interested that I became somebody. He had high ambitions about me, he wanted me to become an engineer. He said, "You must learn because there is not much money in the shoe-making industry." You see, so he did his best. So he made sure that all my needs were fulfilled. He was so good that he used to send us regularly 100 rupees, which was about 150 shillings in East African currency, and we had a comfortable life. Though my mother had to work, she had to grind masala flour to help us to make out a living, you see, because the money was not enough. She was also a very hard-working woman and she also gave us a lot of good training to be honest, to be truthful and treat yourself well at the same time. She made sure that I was well protected, I was well looked after, food wise and education wise. Although they are not there at the moment but I really owe them a lot, my parents and my grandparents.

07:00 I So when you studied English, what did you do after that?

07:05 R Well I had to go right up to matric, the college matric, but because my age was nearing 16 my father said I'd better go to East Africa before the age runs out you see, because there was an age limit. So I had to leave. Just a year short of the matriculation, I had to leave education. Then I went to East Africa with my mother and younger brother and that was in 1953. And then I went there and then I had difficulty because the English wasn't up to the standard. So again, my father was very ambitious, very caring, and he enrolled me in a private tuition place you see, school. And there I studied just English, you see. And then I went to a school called Allidina Visram High School, a very prominent school in Mombasa. There, luckily I got admission you see because there also they had the 11 Plus exam, you see. Not exactly 11 Plus, something- unless you passed that you couldn't go to a secondary school. But luckily I skipped that and I went straight into the second year of the secondary school.

They used to call it Form One, Two, Three and Four. I was admitted in Form Two, and I was good in all the subjects but not so good in English. But I still made it, and I went right up to Form Four which is equivalent to an O-Level these days. I got a second grade because unless you got a credit, they used to call it, or O-Level in English, they wouldn't give you Grade One. So I had good results in all the subjects except English. I just got a pass below O-Level. So I was not very happy either, nor were my parents because they had high hopes that I should go to university. Unfortunately there was no university that I- there was only one- and they applied for it to become a civil engineer and unfortunately it was turned down because I didn't have the O-Level in English. So I was a bit disappointed. So there were two options, either to become a bank clerk or a teacher. The bank clerk salary was not enough, just 350 shillings. Whereas if you became a teacher you had to train for two years and, at the end of the two years training, if you passed the exam and everything, you could get 785 shillings. I still remember the amount. Plus holidays. Plus long leave. So that attracted me. So I joined the teacher training college, became a teacher and taught for nearly about 15 years in Kenya.

It was a primary school. I was a primary school teacher and I taught in a primary school. There also I had to work hard because I never thought about the money. I always thought about children because if they did not do well in their exams they will be thrown out, because they were no other schools. Either they go to a grammar school- they go to a secondary school or are just thrown out. There are no other facilities, just like where they could go to another school, you see. So I always thought about the children's future. I worked very hard. I never gave any tuition because it's like if I gave tuition to children to earn money I was neglecting the day time duty. So I did my best to teach them and I'm very happy that lots of students, even today, they respect me. Some of them are engineers, some are doctors, some are pharmacists. They are based in UK. One in China as

well. Today they really respect me. Whenever there is any social function or marriage or anything they still invite me. And actually they bow down to me so, what greater respect [we] would expect. That was Kenya life, yes.

11:30 I So you came to the UK after becoming a primary school teacher. Tell me what that was like.

11:39 R Well as I said, I did not want to leave Kenya, you see, because it was a very happy respectable life because to them the teacher was a god. Why I had to come? Because my parents had already come here and they said that, "Because you are holding a British passport, sooner or later you will have to come here. So the earlier you come the better." So myself and my wife and my daughter we came in '76 you see. Then also when I resigned from the job you see I get a pension from Kenya. The Education Officer called me in his office. He say, "Is there anything wrong with this establishment? With your headmaster? I can rectify that. Why are you leaving this country? You are such a good teacher." But I told him there is nothing against Kenya, even today I love Kenya, but the only reason is because of the family. The family is already split, so we'd better join them and my parents were old so I'd better be with them.

Coming here I was very, very unhappy. Number one was the weather because there it was twelve hours sunshine, beautiful life. Wonderful life and a lot of respect. Coming here, unfortunately they would not recognise my qualification although it was given, the qualification was given during the British days, you see. And my certificate which I still hold it has the emblem of the Queen, but they wouldn't recognise it. They say, "You do it all over again." And it was not possible because, if you went to a college you had to have what you call three years residential qualification, which I didn't have. So I tried everywhere, I couldn't get a job anywhere. Then luckily I landed in the Civil Service. In those days they used to call it Income Support, now it's Supplementary, and now they call it Jobcentreplus, something like that you see. It was not very, I was not cut out to be a clerk but I had to because I didn't want to be on the benefit for a long time, you see. And with lots of difficulties I pulled through. I survived to be frank with you, you see.

But some people were very helpful because English was another- see your pronunciation was different. We were taught in King's English. Here it is local, and sometimes you wouldn't understand. So I did cause some frustration to some people. But anyway, there were some very helpful people in the department, they were very helpful and they guided me. And I found it difficult quite often and luckily I survived, and now in 1999 I retired, after about 20 years or so. And then since then, I am now a retired pensioner enjoying the pension, and I spend my time doing social work.

When I came here a friend of mine he said, "You are a teacher, so why not start the mother tongue classes here?" And that was something I was looking forward to, because that gave me a lot of pleasure. I was not cut out to be a clerk so I was very happy in the eight hours I put in in the Civil Service in the day. But when I taught Gujarati, our mother tongue, to the children, I really, it gave me a lot of internal satisfaction and even today we continue that. For the last 38 years we have been teaching Gujarati to the children and that has made me very famous, to put it that way, or popular in the community we live in. And here also most of the children who have passed are now in good places and whenever there is any function in their house, whenever they are getting married, I'm invited. So that is my greatest award.

16:22 I Tell me a little bit about when you started doing what you were doing in Stratford Road, on Stratford Road.

16:31 R Well the Gujarati school we started was in Sparkhill Centre, and although I live in Kings Heath in Birmingham, all my activities are in Sparkhill. We also temple in Sparkhill. When we came in '76 there were hardly any temples in this area. At the moment there are three temples you see, and we had to do a lot of hard work. In those days there was no email. Even telephones we didn't have. I didn't have the car either. We had to travel by bus, but whatever community circulars we had to send out, I used to go and deliver them in knee deep snow. And we used to contact these people and people appreciate it, even today, because in those days I would- that generation had to work very hard, to get the culture and the religious practices right.

And now after nearly 30 years or so we see the fruits of that, you see. Now we've got temples, halls, car, and lots of people because their economic circumstances have improved. They have moved into better areas of Birmingham. Previously they used to live in very, what do you call them, terrace houses with no more facilities than just Kerosene heaters. It was cold and outside there was all snow, snow, snow, and people had lots of difficulties. But then things are better now. Even the weather has improved a lot, (laughs) yes.

18:15 I Tell me what you remember of Sparkhill back in the times that you first started working there.

18:25 R When I started here I was happy that lots of people from East Africa were residing in Sparkhill, so we could communicate with them. We could click with them you see. And our vegetables were available because I am a vegetarian, so we could get vegetables in the Sparkhill area.

People, we went to the shops. In those days there were very few Asian shops, you see. But the few shops there, we were serving the community. And we could walk to each other's house because they all lived in one

street, you see. There were not many cars so it was easy. Now things have changed terribly and you hardly get any space to park. Both sides of the roads are parked with cars. And we have happy memories of Sparkhill, yeah, apart from the weather. It was wonderful, yes. I still remember, yeah. And as I said, I mean, though we have moved, lots of people have moved out of Sparkhill, for shopping, for religious activities they still converge in Sparkhill.

19:46 I What were the activities that you ran and the kind of people that took part in activities in Sparkhill Centre?

19:55 R Yeah. First of all, as I said, we started the Gujarati school. And it was good in those days because their parents knew Gujarati, and they were interested that the children learned Gujarati, so we use to hold functions, yearly functions. We used to hold competitions as well, a rangoli competition with the Diwali. We used to hold concerts as well you see, where children would contribute, you see. They would prepare items like plays, Bhajans, poems and they used to exhibit in front. I mean they used to exhibit in front of the audience you see. So those were the activities. Plus we used to take them out to different places because people didn't have car in those days so we used to hire a coach. We went to the seaside and then in the coach also we used to play antakshari singing competition.

People always look forward to our functions, our programmes, you see. And they always supported us. And in those days they said, "If you..." This was the thing that they always said, that if we run short of money to run this school they would write a blank cheque for us to help us. So there was a lot of support from the people.

Now the situation unfortunately has changed because the parents these days, they were born here alright. They were very young when they came here. So they don't know their mother tongue but they want their children to learn Gujarati or their mother tongue. So they are at a loss but they say, "We must try." So we do teach them but it is difficult, it's not so easy as it used to be, you see, because the home circumstances have changed. The home language has changed. Most of them speak English now. So we are unfortunately they are fighting a losing battle but as I said, I won't give it up. It's better to try than to give it up.

22:07 I Tell me about the children and the people that came to the Centre.

22:16 R Most of the children, they had their parents from East Africa, and they were very well behaved. They came from school about 3:30 and they still found time to come to school because they lived nearby, not very far away. Nowadays the traffic problem. Most of them have moved out of Sparkhill, either in Solihull or Shirley or Sutton Coldfield, so they find it very difficult to come to learn Gujarati. But they still make an effort. They still do make

an effort. But one thing there, the children and the parents, everybody was so cooperative, so helpful. That we love teaching. And I remember one thing, most of the teachers who are there, they are not trained, but they learned the hard way. Luckily I was trained, so I always gave them a hand, trained them. I used to teach and they used to observe. My wife is also a teacher. She also used to help me. She would do a lesson and the teachers would sit there. What I said, "That if you're really interested, what is important is that you should be interested and the technique would come, would follow."

So most of our teachers are not trained but they love to teach. And most of them are voluntary; they don't get paid for it. We used to get a grant from the City Council under Section 11, if I remember rightly. But unfortunately for the last two years it has dried up. And Sparkhill Centre, where we used to run our school, previously in the beginning they gave it us for free; we didn't have to pay any rent. Then because of the economic circumstances they started charging. The grant ran out so we couldn't afford to run our class in the Sparkhill Centre. So we requested the temple, the Laxmi Narayan Temple which is in Sparkhill as well, on Warwick Road. And luckily I'm a member on the committee, a committee member there, and I look after the religious education of the children. We requested them to accommodate us and thank god they have helped us. So we run a school there every Friday from 5:00 to 7:00, two of us. And we also run a school in another hall called BPM Hall, Birmingham Pragati Mandal, every Saturday from 4:00 to 6:00. In other words, there is interest and it is up to us to carry on. The number may dwindle, sometimes very low but then we shouldn't give up, we should always go on trying and that's what I believe in. And luckily I go to different functions and I always look out for future teachers who would be interested in teaching and they help me.