

Sites and Signs of Remembrance interviews

Transcript of Interview between Pam Schweitzer and Mohinda Singh Rehal and Siva Singh Nandra at the Indian Sikh Temple

Transcribed by John Hogg, Greenwich University student of History

Question: We're particularly interested to know what it was like for people when they first came over. Where did you go for friendship and support and social life? What did people do for a meeting place when they first came? What was it like?

Seva SinghNandra: When we first came here we used to go to a temple in the East End. We used to go there every Sunday. We had a Sunday evening session there. Eventually we started one over here at Burrage Place. Before Burrage Place, there was another one at Plumstead Manor School. We used to gather there every Sunday. We rented a room inside the school. Then we started renting the Burrage Road church. We stayed there up to about 1968, then we rented another church on Herbert Road. After that we bought a pub on Brookhill Road and converted it into a Sikh temple but it wasn't big enough. And then this place came up for offer. This was first Woolwich Town Hall then it was a Freemasons building, then it was a Roman Catholic club and now it is a Sikh Temple. This building was bought in 1968 at a price of £12,000. It was quite cheap at that time, but it was a derelict site then with no ceilings, tons of pigeon droppings everywhere. It took us about five years to bring it into use. We opened the ground floor first then worked on the upper floors. Now it is fully repaired. When we first started the gatherings Mister Phull was the president then there were various presidents (list follows)

Mohinder Singh Rehal: We made a constitution to run this place and elected a Chairman and a committee of five members. We became a registered charity in 1991.

Seva SinghNandra: The money was raised from voluntary donations, £12,000. Four holding trustees raised money on their own properties. All the initial building work was done on a voluntary basis, by community members. Most of them have passed away now. At that time I was only a kid, I was apprentice mechanical engineer at Woolwich College but I worked on the external rendering with the rendering crowd of Charna brothers and did all the roofing and guttering here. Then I went in the background, on the backburner.

Mohinder Singh Rehal: So gradually we regenerated the whole place. Change everything from A to Z and built this.

Pam: Was everyone who worked on the centre builders?

Mohinder Singh Rehal: They were all builders, plumbers, carpenters, all professionals in their own ways, Bricklayers, electricians. I was first a welder then a carpenter myself.

Seva Singh Nandra: I started off as a mechanical engineer; I'm a Jack of all trades, master of none. I went into building, now I am principal building controller of Greenwich council. Now I'm looking at some of the buildings around the Dome, I worked on the dome at the turn of the century. It's a big responsibility, but that's me.

Pam: What do you think of the dome at the moment?

Seva Singh Nandra: It's going well. It's being furnished for some celebrations soon. All the fitting out is in progress and five hundred people are working there at the moment. Robert Macalpine?? is the main contractors there.

Pam: You said when you started; you said you started at Plumstead Manor School. What did you do together when you met at weekends as a community in the rented room?

Seva Singh Nandra: We did exactly the same as now, our Sikh prayers and then a family common meal. We ate together a family common meal but it was a small community then. Yes we used to cook food at home and take it there. We cooked food at home and then shared it with each other. We had a lot of difficulty at first when we started the building. We shared responsibility for running this place. This was really a deserted desolate place. We all worked together to make it our beautiful church and we gave the shape to this building as a church. Now this place is not only a church it is a multi-cultural social place. For celebrations we do marriages here, engagements and birth celebrations. Also for senior citizens Punjabi school, computers.

Pam: A Punjabi school for teaching the Punjabi language?

Mohinda Singh Rehal: Yes and you can learn computer classes and play music. We have music classes. Every day something is happening. Over the weekend is awfully busy. There are five to six hundred men here every Saturday and Sunday. Meals are to order every day seven days a week.

Pam: Are they all local people?

Mohinda Singh Rehal: Some are local some are not. There are about four hundred and fifty members of this temple. Four hundred and fifty families actually.

Pam: Is there something special and different about this Sikh Temple or is it how things have developed in other temples throughout London?

Mohinder Singh Rehal: This is a typical development, yes. Other Sikh temples in the UK have developed on the same basis. The basic principles are the same no matter which Gurdwara you go to. They have their own common kitchen, their own holy book. The congregations do exactly the same in other Gurdwaras, there is no difference at all.

Pam: What about the women?

Mohinder Singh Rehal: The women in the Gurdwara have their own organisation, as president, vice-president and general secretary and so on. They run it themselves.

Seva Singh Nandra: They have equal rights As advocated five hundred years ago.

Mohinder: There's no doubt about it, total equality male or female

Seva SinghNandra: Wherever you see the Sikh flag as you have seen outside, that symbolises the Sikh freedoms, worshipping places for Sikhs.

Pam: What brought Sikh people to Woolwich in the first place?

Mohinder: Well some people came from Kenya when Idi Amin kicked them out in the early seventies. They had to come here. I came here because my relatives were here and I had to join my relatives and quite a few had come to Woolwich. Of course the British people used to rule over Kenya so they knew our culture over there. So when the Indian people got the British passport they settled over here. Some settled in Canada and some went elsewhere.

Seva Singh Nandra: I was educated by a Mr Johnston, he used to run a factory in Charlton. I joined him as a worker and he took me to Woolwich College and he said I'll pay your fees, I'll buy your books you carry on studying and he footed the bill for five years. He was an ex major in the army who served in the Punjab.

Pam: Really, he'd served in the Punjab so he was familiar.

Mohinder: That's why he knew our culture. But I got all my education from the Punjab where I was born. I got my priority voucher in the early sixties in 1964. I got the voucher so I came to this country. First I got married then I settled here. First I lived in Dartford then I moved to Ilford. From Ilford I came back to Welling then. All through my life I always came back to this Gurdwara.

Pam: There's always this continuity to it, there's a strong hospitality approach, isn't there? People come from other areas. What about going back?

Seva SinghNandra: I was born in Kenya but spent most of my life over here. *Mohinder:* Before I came over here I was in India from 1959 to 1965.

Pam: Have either of you been back to India?

Mohinder: I go back every year.

Seva SinghNandra: I'm going back next week

Pam: Which part?

Mohinder: I go to the Punjab and Delhi but my wife's relatives live in Aggra, just near Taj Mahal.

Pam: But your family, your parents' generation, were caught up in partition and so on.

Mohinder: They've all gone now that generation. (Singh Nandra probably)
They've all gone now my parents.

Pam: Do you have memories of that time?

Mohinder: When the partition took place I was only about seven years old and have little memories of it but it was horrible, so horrible, bodies everywhere, too much killing.

Pam: Did your family move from what is now Pakistan into India at that time?

Mohinder: My ancestors they used to go to a place called Quattar which was part of Pakistan at that time but apart from that before 1947 they all come back to East Punjab. West Punjab is now Pakistan.

Seva SinghNandra: The community spirit when I first came here was very good. We had one community policeman for the whole of the Plumstead area. It was that peaceful. Nobody used to lock their front doors. There was no such thing as racial discrimination. And people were so honest.

Pam: And did you feel welcome when you first came here?

Seva SinghNandra: Yes I did.

Pam: Did you too Mr Singh?

Mohinder: There was a lot of colour bar when it came to employment.

Seva SinghNandra: When it came to employment it was impossible. I was given the opportunity under the Johnston's to study and after that I wanted to go and work. I worked sometimes for Allen's Duplicators of Charlton and then _____ of Thamesmead but when I applied for GEC they wanted me to get a haircut. My parents wouldn't let me cut my hair. I was selected under a scheme as a trainee pilot for British Airways and my parents wouldn't allow me to cut the hair. I was selected as a mechanical inspector for Rolls Royce Coventry Engineers with the offer of a house at the same time and my parents wouldn't let me cut my hair.

Pam: Really, of course it wouldn't be a problem today would it?

Seva SinghNandra: I don't need a haircut now!

Pam: They've changed the legislation now.

Seva SinghNandra: In 1945 there was a Sikh regiment in the British army in India. Anyone who was not a Amertari (?) Sikh would not be enrolled into the army. They could not take any positions in the army. Unless he was a fully practising Sikh. And a Sikh's word was taken as gospel and nobody would doubt it. If somebody said he was innocent, then he is innocent. And then no further action would be taken. There was that strong belief.

Pam: When you first came over, were you already married? Or did you go back home to find a wife?

Mohinder: My family found me a wife over there. My brother was here My in-laws were there, but now some are here and some moved to Delhi.

Pam: How did your wife respond to coming over here?

Mohinder: She was quite happy, we had quite a normal life.

Pam: And your children?

Mohinder: All my children were born in Dartford and they got their education from there. Then I moved to Stratford, then to Ilford.

Pam: Did your children do well in their schooling?

Mohinder: Yes, they did well.

Pam: And yours?

Seva SinghNandra: I married here in 1972. I had six girls to choose from and I chose my missus. I used to pay her visits for well over a year before we got married. It was here on 15th October 1972.

Pam: Was that the first wedding to be held here?

Mohinder: No, the first was Mr Chana's daughter.

Seva SinghNandra: We used to own the house here at number 10 Masons Road when I got married. Then I bought a house in Charlton where I had three kids, a boy and two daughters. The boy is a structural engineer and a qualified architect. He worked at the Stuttgart army base and the town hall there in Germany. Now he's back here working with the practice. My daughter qualified as a biochemist and worked in Guys Hospital. But she didn't like it. She then qualified as an accountant. She's now working for the New Zealand government, for the equivalent of BT. My younger daughter graduated last year from the University of Greenwich in multimedia.

Pam: How old were you when you came here?

Mohinder: I was 25 in 1964. I had all my education in India. When I had done my graduation from there, I applied to come over here. Within a couple of weeks they gave me a voucher. I was a qualified teacher and there was no restriction at all.

Pam: I suppose there was a shortage of teachers over here? But were you very disappointed when they didn't let you teach over here?

Mohinder: Yes, I used to teach economics and history, but my major problem was my pronunciation. It was easy for me to understand academic people, but with people who hardly knew their 3 Rs, it was difficult for me to understand them. It was difficult for me and for everyone round me. I found it very hard to understand what they say and they couldn't understand me.

Pam: What about your wife? Did she take work immediately?

Mohinder: She didn't work much. She worked indoors as a clothes designer actually and she was very active.

Pam: Where did she go for the things you needed when you first came over? What shops were there for her needs?

Mohinder: We used to go to Aldgate East where there were many Indian shops, or to Gravesend where there was a very old grocery shop, but it was a long way to go and there wasn't much in Dartford. Lots of people started up Indian shops in Aldgate, Bangladeshis and Punjabi people had their own shops and there was a very old market. So people would buy there and meet together.

Pam: Do people still go to Aldgate to meet up?

Mohinder: Not really. Everyone is busy with their own commitments, families, children and grandchildren. And it's too congested there. It's all available here.

Pam: What about restaurants?

Mohinder: There were a few small ones early on, and in Gravesend and Ilford. Everything is changing so rapidly.

Pam: Do you feel comfortable about the way things are going multiculturally?

Mohinder: Oh yes. When I came very few people had washing machines, and central heating wasn't there... we used to have paraffin heaters, and people were on small incomes. People were content at that time with small incomes. Now people are buying big houses Now I am living with my son and daughter-in-law. That works well for us. I have two grandchildren. They go to school in Plumstead. One is 8 and the girl is 6.

Pam: From what you've said, it would never occur to you to go back and live in India, because everyone you love is over here now.

Mohinder: They are all settled here now. Even my girl, she is settled here with her husband and children. And my son-in-law's parents are here. I haven't got many relatives in India. Some on my in-law's side.... my mother-in-law is there living with her sons. Apart from that, I don't know anybody there now.

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