Ramniklal Solanki Pioneers Research Project

The untold stories of Britain's South Asian communities

University of Southampton

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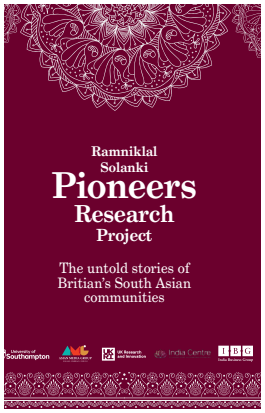

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Forewords

IT gives me immense pleasure to support the public unveiling of the first series of the Ramniklal Solanki Pioneers Flagship Research Project led by our University India Centre in collaboration with the Asian Media Group and supported by UKRI and India Business Group.

The biographies of the ten Pioneers included in this series narrate the extraordinary contributions of South Asian diaspora over the last 100 years to shaping and integrating modern Britain. From public services, arts and entertainment to healthcare, community and sports, I find it inspiring and invigorating to see the impactful leadership that our Pioneers demonstrated in their respective fields of expertise and service. They rightly resonate the University of Southampton's triple helix approach and values in advancing the principles and practices of equality, diversity and inclusivity.

I congratulate the leadership of my colleagues in steering this timely nationally relevant interdisciplinary research project, including the founding directors of the University India Centre - Professor Jane Falkingham, Professor Sabu Padmadas and Mr Amarjit Singh, and the research team Dr Priti Mishra, Dr Bindi Shah and Professor Ajit Nayak. Also of course, my sincere appreciations for the unflinching support of our partners Mr Kalpesh Solanki, Mr Shailesh Solanki, Professor Barnie Choudhury and last but not the least the Chair of the Project, Lord Patel of Bradford.

Finally, I hope this book will inspire our wider community across generations to uplift the ethos and values of multicultural Britain. On behalf of the University of Southampton, I reassert my support to the Pioneers flagship research project, as we continue to excel in achieving the remarkable and building an inclusive world.

Professor Mark E. Smith CBE
President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Southampton

NO-ONE should underestimate the impact that south Asians have made to the British way of life. So, when Kalpesh and Shailesh approached me, I knew I wanted to be involved in this important project and do everything to make their vision come true. Their parents Ramniklal and Parvatiben Solanki were true pioneers. They started the first newspaper, Garavi Gujarat in their living room in the late 1960s. Both lived to see the growth of a publishing empire, and today the Asian Media Group is known throughout Britain for holding power to account and serving south Asian communities.

What we wanted to create in this pilot project is a taster of some of the diverse areas where south Asians have made their mark. It is axiomatic that we have entered every profession, every industry and every sphere of public life. We have truly achieved despite challenges. Few of us will disagree that our achievements are because of the sacrifices of the generations who did so much to pave the way. The metaphor 'standing on the shoulders of giants' has never been more apt. We hope the stories in this booklet will ignite future generations of British-Asians to contribute and surpass those in whose footsteps they follow. My sincere thanks and appreciation to all project partners and stakeholders, especially the academic team at the University of Southampton for their unwavering support.

Lord Kamlesh Patel of Bradford OBE
Chancellor, University of Southampton,
Hon'ble Patron, University India Centre and Chairman of India Business Group

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SOUTH Asian communities have been part of Britain's consciousness since the time of the British-Raj. In those days, India was part of the empire, and the stories written about our forebears were through a particular lens. That narrative was not of our making, and Rudyard Kipling and EM Forster wrote what they thought they knew.

It was the 1960s when our parents' generation were asked to come to the UK to fill vacant jobs that we saw the first inklings of the changing face of Britain. A chance to make our own stories. From those who arrived with five pounds in their pocket to the entrepreneurs who now own multi-billion-pound businesses via those who serve heroically in the NHS.

Over the past six decades, we have seen how much we have embraced our country's culture, enhanced its reputation, and encapsulated what it means to be British and south Asian. It was a chance conversation with a senior judge who asked this question, "Who will tell my story about what I contributed to Britain?" Sir Mota Singh, Britain's first ethnic minority judge, is sadly no longer with us, but it made us realise that we have not told the hundreds of stories about the pioneers who have not only contributed to Britain but changed its narrative.

Our parents, Ramniklal and Parvatiben Solanki were true pioneers, who from humble beginnings built Asian Media Group into Britain's biggest Asian publishing house. Their story is replicated throughout Britain, where first generation immigrants built thriving enterprises through untold hardship. So, the seeds of an idea were born, and it is thanks to Professor Lord Patel of Bradford who enabled our wonderful partnership with the University of Southampton, our editor at large, Barnie Choudhury, and the India Business Group, that we have started to tell some of our wonderful stories. We hope you enjoy them and are inspired by them.

Kalpesh R Solanki, Group Managing Editor, Asian Media Group;
Shailesh R Solanki, Executive Editor, Asian Media Group.

WHEN I arrived as a child of four-and-a-half in 1969, the BBC had a programme called *Nai Zindagi Naya Jeevan*. It was a nice way of welcoming both Urdu and Hindi speakers since the two phrases – *nai zindagi* and *naya jeevan* – mean the same thing – new life – in the respective languages. The reason I tell this story is because my family and I watched Mahendra Kaul and Saleem Shahed religiously every Sunday morning. For me, though, these uncles inspired me to join the BBC.

My story is not unique. Up and down the country, south Asian judges, consultant-doctors, chief executives, MPs, professors, actors, community campaigners, you name it, owe their careers to those who have gone before. Our predecessors made our lives easier, and they taught us some huge lessons. We need to be 10 times smarter, demonstrate resilience, and have a work ethic which goes above and beyond.

Our partners at the University of Southampton will analyse the intricate skills of the pioneers I have had the privilege to meet and write about. They will provide insights into the south Asian phenomenon. But if I have learnt one thing, in an age where the world seems to be dissolving into a vat of right-wing extremism, it is that Britain would be so much poorer if we did not have our wonderful multicultural society. I urge you to read this booklet and then ask one question: what would Britain be without the south Asian story?

Professor Barnie Choudhury
Co-lead Investigator, Pioneers Project and Editor-at-large, *Eastern Eye*

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THE ICON:
Meera Syal

MEERA SYAL

> I was too westernised for the Indian girls and too Indian for the white kids

‘It almost didn’t happen for me’

A trailblazer’s fight for representation

IT IS HARD to believe that Meera Syal almost did not become the big star she is today.

We are meeting in the *Asian Media Group*’s headquarters near Westminster.

Hours before our chat, Syal had returned from Prague, the Czech Republic capital, where she was filming an Amazon series.

More about that later.

She was alone. No fuss, and certainly not a diva.

It is no exaggeration to say that Syal is a national treasure, someone who has forged her way to the top through sheer talent.

“I created an opportunity when I created a show.

“There was something in me that wants to say, if I hadn’t created the show, it wouldn’t have happened.

“So, it’s a kind of synthesis of both, there’s a lot of luck involved in this profession.

“But it doesn’t just come to you, you have to work assuming that the

universe is gonna come call and say I'm here.

"And you've got to say, I've got this, I'm ready."

To understand Syal, we need to go back to her parents and grandparents.

Let us start with her grandparents.

"My grandfather [on my father's side] was a communist journalist who founded *Blitz* and *Patriot*, prominent in supporting freedom fighters.

"So, we had quite a freedom fighter, communist legacy.

"My dad's family were Hindus, very poor because they lost everything in partition, there were eight of them.

"They were educated but had very little.

"My mum's family were fairly traditional Sikhs, who had moved from Chandigarh (Punjab) to Delhi.

"My grandfather had lost all his money, he had a terrible accident, his brothers had stolen his share, so Indian one of those *Dynasty* kind plotlines.

"So, they ended up in Delhi with much reduced circumstances, but not anywhere near my dad's family."

And as for her parents, well, thereby hangs a tale worthy of Mills and Boon with the Indian Bollywood love story thrown in.

They met in college, fell in love, and they – a Hindu and Sikh – married in secret.

"My mother knew her family would never accept it, so in the third year before mum was about to graduate, they eloped secretly, planned it all, and got married.

"Then mum returned to her parents' house to finish the last couple of months of her degree.

"Her father didn't talk to her for 14 years, her mother came around much quicker, but she wasn't allowed in the house for 14 years."

Syal was born in Wolverhampton in 1961, and she depicted her semi-autobiographical childhood in her best-selling book and film, *Anita and Me*.

The point was that she did grow up in a former mining village of Essington where her family were the only Asians.

Her parents embraced village life, and she described her childhood as idyllic, "cycling with mates, scabby knees, a real tomboy".

This was the late 1960s, when the nearby MP was Enoch Powell, infamous for his "Rivers of blood" speech.

Meera Syal with Barry Gardiner MP when she won the Best Actress award at the *Eastern Eye*'s ACTA 2024; *(below)* at the UK premiere of *The Almond And The Seahorse* at Vue West End on April 2024

The family experienced racism, but not from villagers, who were white, working class, and were "a great community".

"There are a lot of stories that your parents don't tell you, especially when you're little, because they don't want to upset you.

"But the racism, the no Irish, blacks and dogs notices, the going for a job interview and suddenly finding it's mysteriously filled.

"They went through all of that, and I did used to ask them do you regret coming, and they've always said no, absolutely not, because you kids would never have had the opportunities in India that you got here."

The young Meera would often have to use her fists to escape her out-of-village, racist, abusers.

"When I got to senior school, it was a long, long way, and I had to take two buses," she remembered. "If I missed that bus, I had to walk through a council estate, and I did miss the bus quite often.

"But I learned really early on that if I looked like a victim and I behaved like a victim, it [the abuse] got worse.

"And if I walked with confidence, and if I said stuff back and occasionally had to use my fist sadly, it got less.

"I thought, you know what, if I'm going to survive here, I really got to stand firm and stand tall, just got to front it out, no matter how scared I am, because this isn't going to go away.

"And I can't apologise for the space I occupy."

She never told her parents about these fights or the racism she faced because Syal did not want to worry them.

But that isolation was not a curse.

In fact, she valued the freedom that her relatives never had.

"I was on my bike from the moment I got up, and my mum would have to come and find me in the fields, when it was getting dark.

"But how wonderful for kids to have that kind of unfettered spirit, you know, especially for a girl.

"Whereas all my other friends who lived in Aston (Birmingham), or wherever, every neighbour was a Punjabi, and you couldn't do anything.

"You couldn't even go to the local shop without people knowing, and I had a very different upbringing.

"I never had any of that, and I think that's because my parents had an unconventional start themselves.

"Right from the beginning, they've gone, the community doesn't like this, but we're gonna do it anyway."

You could sense that these were the early sketches for her comedy.

"My first thought often was the absurdity of it all.

"I was the kid in the corner that was sort of giggling away, where my hand goes up, and I say, 'Does anyone else think that…? Oh, no, it's just me, okay.'

"Which is why *Goodness Gracious Me* was such a revelation for me just find this whole

bunch of people that actually saw the absurdity of that cultural clash.

"People often said we'd be a Mongol generation, we wouldn't belong anywhere.

"I never felt that, I thought it's quite the reverse of that.

"It's a double blessing, I have two cultural lenses, and it's really unique.

"I think it's no accident that so many creative people come from my generation because when you don't belong anywhere you find you have to love the space of not belonging, and then you have to find the freedom in it.

"And that space is creative."

Syal continued, "I was too westernised for the Indian girls and too Indian for the white kids, so I wore masks all the time.

"I moved from one bit of society to another, and I learned to adapt.

"My voice was different even, whether it was with the mates (Birmingham accent} or with my auntie's (Indian accent).

"So, no wonder I became an actor when you don't quite fit in anywhere, and I hear this from a lot of creative people, not just people from a different race."

Her childhood made her question her identity and become comfortable in her own skin.

"It makes you see the big picture all the time, you're always looking for connections, you're always looking for what are the things that we have in common? What are the points of contact? How can I make you understand me?

"I understand you because I'm growing up in your culture, but how do you see me?

"You're forced to ask yourself the questions that 99 per cent of people in the world don't have to ask, because their lives are comfortable, and they belong.

"When you don't or when people every day going, what are you doing here, why don't you go back?

"You have to know why you're here, you have to try and find out who you are, when you fight for your place in the world."

This brings us to a question about south Asian culture today – how much do British-Asian communities hang onto a bygone era when, in reality, those "back home" have moved on?

"I realised that when I went to India went on my own when I was 22, which is a long time ago, where I got off the plane in my salwar-kameez.

"My cousin was at the other end with a mini-skirt up there, saying 'What the hell are you wearing, *yaar* (friend), God, take it off?' and my head's about to explode.

"We are living in an immigrant bubble.

"A lot of our parents' generation have values of whatever India is, what a good Indian woman is, they were the values when they left India.

"Unless you're going back to India regularly, you're going to have no idea how much it's changing, culture changes all the time."

And it is the idea which remains entrenched in British-Asian culture, that the women must serve the men.

"Every south Asian woman who has a son has a massive responsibility to rewire their brain," said Syal on that point.

"We're talking about centuries of conditioning, it's not going to be quick.

"Even now, I mean, I will naturally be the first to jump up and serve everybody and clear up, it's sort of in my DNA.

"I want to do that because I love my family, but you have to catch yourself, there are lots of things you fall into because you've just been brought up that way."

Meera Syal with Sanjeev Bhaskar

Meera Syal at The Olivier Awards 2023

Syal's parents supported her decision to go to the University of Manchester to read English and drama, where she got a double first.

This was hugely significant for Asian immigrants who wanted their offspring to become doctors, dentists, pharmacists, engineers and lawyers.

But it was a lonely time for Syal, the only south Asian on her course.

"I don't ever remember seeing another brown face in the arts department at all, plenty in the medical school, obviously.

"But actually, it gave me a massive advantage because I suddenly realised that a lot of the material I was creating, people have never heard before.

"I was so used to being the only one in the room all the time, so in the early years, you feel this sort of madness, with the loneliness, leads you to think am I really mad trying to do this?

"I don't see anybody out there like me, how can I get a job? Who will hire me? Who will think whatever I write is relevant or interesting? Will they get it? All of these things."

Syal convinced herself that no one would hire her.

"I had my whole life lined up," she explained, "I had an MA place booked at Leeds, I was going to do drama and psychotherapy, and then the year after that I had a PGCE place booked.

"So, I was going to work with children with learning difficulties, communication difficulties through drama.

"It's now a huge thing, but there was only one course then, so honestly, my life was mapped out, and that's what I was gonna do."

But student Syal co-wrote what she described as her "swansong to acting" – a one-woman play.

One of Us told the story of a West Midlands-born Indian girl who runs away from home to become an actress, where Syal performed all the parts. Her performance won prizes, but more importantly got the attention of a director from the *Royal Court Theatre*, who offered her a job and an Equity [actor's union] card.

"I ended up doing theatre really for my first decade.

"It was a long time before I got into television because I was lucky enough to hit the London theatre scene just this time where there was a real welcoming of diverse voices.

"In theatre, I was being offered roles I would never ever play on screen, and still probably [would] not.

"A Peruvian millionaire in *Serious Money*, a deaf-mute girl in the 17th century in *Birthright* at the Royal Court.

"So, I did my first four or five years with the *Royal Court*, a whole plethora of parts that had nothing to do with race."

After that came the success of her 1993 screenplay *Bhaji on the Beach*, which became a film directed by *Bend It Like Beckham* director Gurinder Chadha.

But it will be for the comedy sketch show *Goodness Gracious Me* that Syal, and her husband Sanjiv Bhaskar, will be best known. This changed the comedy landscape in Britain.

For the first time in its history, that series showed that not only were south Asians funny, but they could poke fun at themselves.

Going for an English became popular, and it introduced "chuddies" [pants] to the country's lexicon.

Its characters too, were certainly ahead of their time.

Britain has a south Asian prime minister and a home secretary whose ambitions are to curtail immigration.

How reminiscent is that of *Goodness Gracious Me*'s Coopers and Robinsons?

Despite winning prestigious awards, the BBC axed the show after three series.

It would be several years before *The Kumars at No. 42* would be commissioned by the BBC, Syal told *Pioneers*.

Even today, she has difficulties in getting her projects commissioned.

"I've hardly had anything made over the last few years, and I don't think it's because I'm a shit writer.

"Because a lot of my stories are not the usual stories that they want to see, which is, one generation going 'shame on us', and the other generation, 'I'm gonna do what I want, and I don't care what you say.'

"It's still going on, some version of that cliched 1975 stuff.

"We're not in the boardrooms.

"I would love to have shorthand with the people I go and sell stories to, where I don't have to explain everything, where they actually understand that culture moves laterally as well as forwards.

"I love the quirky stories, I love the way that the lens goes slightly off what you expect, and you just have a great story which throws some light on a completely unexpected way, where race and identity aren't the point, it could be something completely different."

She wants executives to create a fairer profession.

"It's still pretty pitiful," she said. "There are some shining exceptions, like *We Are Lady Parts*.

"Nida Manzoor [creator of the series] is shifting the boundaries on how south Asian women are seen.

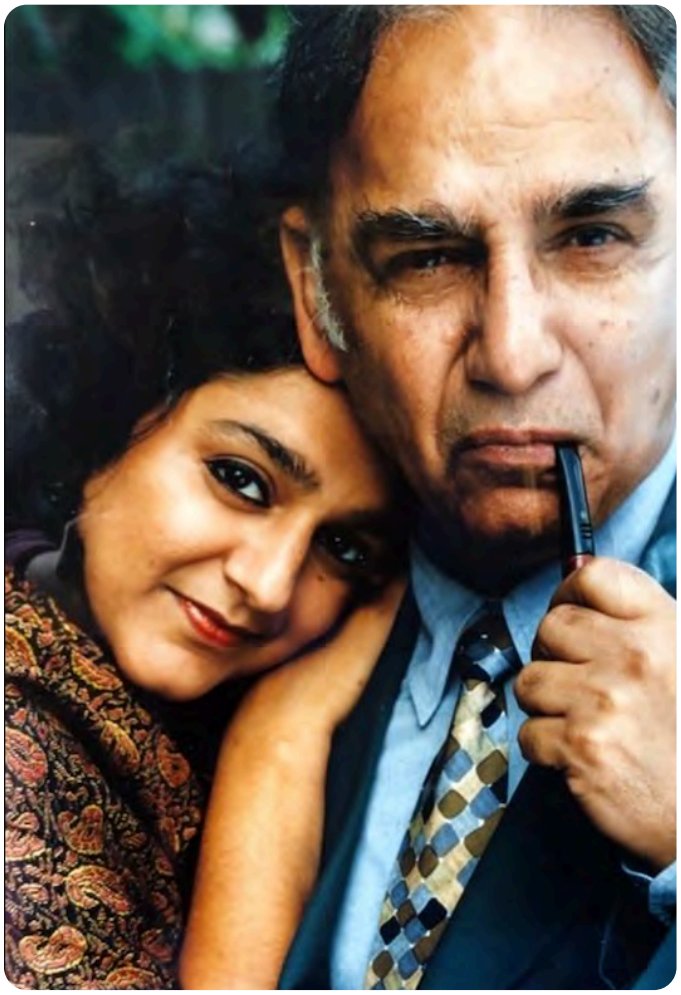
"It just makes me sad, really, we're in 2023, *Goodness Gracious Me* was the 2000s, 23 years later, what have we got?

"We really thought that was going to change things, we have more visible representation on screen for sure, that has changed, you can see it.

"But actually, casting can be cosmetic.

"It's important because if you can see it, you can be it.

"It's really important to switch on the television and see people like you in adverts or in the news or in a role like *Bridgerton* where you'd



Meera Syal with her mother and father; *(facing page)* a portrait of Meera Syal and Sanjiv Baskar at the Royal Academy's summer exhibition 2022

never have seen people of colour in a historical drama.

"Of course, that's important, but when you dig deeper, when you look at the infrastructure, there are hardly any of us in those offices, making those decisions, commissioning those stories, who would understand why these stories need to be told, and that is a real problem."

She revealed that she is currently working on two ideas but was concerned about the lack of cash being invested in making original dramas and screenplays.

"We're also talking during quite a difficult to point in television and film," Syal continued.

"It was the wild west a couple of years ago, because of the pandemic and the need for content, people were commissioning left, right and centre.

"Everybody was shooting, there wasn't enough crew, now all of a sudden, over the past six months, everybody suddenly realised we've run out of money.

"Audiences are leaving, that's why you've seen so many things pulled.

"I've been talking to a few producers that have done the rounds, because I tried to place a couple of scripts at the moment.

"I genuinely do believe them when they say 'This is not a good time with suddenly, after the feast, there's now a famine, we're having to cancel things and pull back things.'

"'For example, we can't do any more historical projects now for at least five years because they're the most expensive.'

"So, everyone's going through this massive restructure because everyone really did go crazy for a couple of years.

"Of course, the first casualties are going to be so called minority stories, because they're seen as the most risky."

Pioneers spoke with Syal the day after she returned from Prague where she was filming the Amazon fantasy series *The Wheel of Time*.

Syal plays Verin Mathwin who, according to fans, is an "extremely important character in the story overall, heavily focused on the pursuit of knowledge and gathering information".

Syal said that America had overtaken Britain in offering high profile and successful roles to actors of colour.

"When I made my speech at BAFTA, I had to think really carefully about it.

"I didn't want to sound ungrateful; I didn't want to not acknowledge that things have changed.

"They have profoundly from when I started, and I want to celebrate all of that.

"But you also want to get the balance to say that we have become complacent, and I realised it when I look at what the south Asian stories are happening in America, because they were way behind us.

> Our experiences mattered when we were so misunderstood and invisible

"When *Goodness Gracious Me* started, there was no concept of south Asian comedy in the States. We really were the first in the diaspora to light that particular touchpaper, and you would assume that after that people would go where are we going next?

"And then we watched Mindy Kaling (an award-winning American actress) and everybody else, run past us, pick up the baton and run with it, and that makes me sad.

"That has a lot to do with funding and infrastructure there.

"There's still sometimes a fear that if a piece has got 70 per cent plus south Asians in it, no one will watch it, and I think people thought that about black actors too."

The star described her book, *Anita and Me*, being put on the school curriculum as a "real moment".

"When I went to a bookshop, and you see those study guides for GCSE and A level, and I had to buy one.

"You open it, and there are pages on the West Midlands and the National Front, the rivers of blood speech and partition, which are all in the book and honestly made me cry.

"I just wanted us to be remembered, I didn't want us to be a little footnote in history that our lives mattered.

"Our experiences mattered when we were so misunderstood and invisible.

"So, that moment for me was really huge, because it was like, 'Oh, my God, there are kids now that are learning about partition that knew nothing about it, that are learning about the rivers of blood speech, that are beginning to understand why we are here.'

"The way that history is taught in this country, we need to change it."

Throughout her career, Syal has never shied away from tackling controversial issues and unpalatable truths among south Asian communities. Her screenplay, *Bhaji on the Beach*, explored domestic violence, for example, and south Asian men criticised her for highlighting the problem.

Syal's memoirs are scheduled for 2025, but they will not be the usual linear timeline.

Instead, the actress wants to take quotes from what people have told her and "riff off them" letting her thoughts take us on a journey.

"It [parity] will happen eventually, I hope it happens in my lifetime, because it's osmosis.

"You can't keep so many good people down, and our creative pool is growing.

"There are now a couple of south Asian women in really interesting positions in development and film now, and they are opening those doors, and they are trying."

ASIAN MILLIONAIRES CAN HELP BOOST THE ARTS, SAYS SYAL

BRITAIN can afford to commission more than one project where people of colour are the story, the actress, author and screenwriter, Meera Syal told *Pioneers*.

She wants Britain to adopt the American model which nurtures south Asian talent in a so called "first look deal".

"Some stars have that, and it probably happens to Riz [Ahmed] now, I would imagine he's reached that level, but they're few and far between."

How does this work?

"It means that you're sort of on a retainer, the agreement is we'll part fund, and the deal is that you bring any idea you have to us first, so, you're under our umbrella," said Syal.

"It doesn't mean you can't go work with someone else, but we want first look, and that's how it works reciprocally, because we think you're so great.

"We would love to see anything you come up with."

In 2021, the global consultants, McKinsey, concluded that, "By addressing the persistent racial inequities, the industry could reap an additional $10 billion (£7.8bn) in annual revenues–about seven per cent more than the assessed baseline of $148bn.

"The handful of black creatives who are in prominent off-screen, 'above the line' positions (that is, creator, producer, writer, or director) find themselves primarily responsible for providing opportunities for other black off-screen talent.

"Unless at least one senior member of a production is black, black talent is largely shut out of those critical roles."

Even so, two global household names shine through America's acting profession – Oprah Winfrey and Shonda Rhimes.

And America appears to take more creative risks when it comes to actors and those of colour behind the scenes.

Disney+ took the chance of putting an American-Pakistani-Muslim teenager in the role of Ms Marvel, and behind the camera, some of the directors were from south Asia.

It could happen in the UK if south Asians invested in the creative arts, said Syal.

"We are the community that has more millionaires than any other ethnic group, why the hell are they not supporting creative endeavours?

"They can make a huge difference, and for them, it will be a tax [write-off].

"Seriously, they're much more interested in seeing returns on their money and whatever they're doing, they don't see investing in the creative industries as a thing, when actually the creative industries in Britain are one of the most successful businesses.

"We bring billions into the economy every year, we are world renowned for our creative, technical expertise.

"But that really does take someone like Lenny Henry, for example, someone extraordinary, it takes someone like that to bring all the millionaires together.

"Why? There are all these stories that need telling, that can change the landscape."

So, how does she feel about those who pit black and south Asian actors against one another?

"It's the oldest game in the book, isn't it?

"Divide and rule stops you seeing the bigger picture, which is that equality is not a pie, if I give you a piece that doesn't mean it's less pie.

"We all deserve a bit, the pie gets bigger, it should."

Meera Syal at the opening night of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Duke Of York's Theatre on May 23, 2024

> I've been able to have those opportunities, because of the advantages of being bought up in Britain

Smashing glass ceilings

Bus driver's son to UK chancellor

SAJID JAVID is the sort of politician who understands the game.

He knows when to speak and when not to utter a single word.

That political acumen is also liberally spread with charm and authenticity – and there was a defining moment when the country saw Javid in all his pioneering majesty.

It was the 2019 Conservative Party conference in Manchester, and Javid was the country's first chancellor of colour, living "above the shop" at Number 11 Downing Street.

His mother was in the audience, and beaming, he asked in Punjabi, "Mummy, did you ever think we'd be here today?"

Under five months later, he would quit his cabinet position on a matter of principle, so rare in a politician – which would ultimately see his protégé become the UK's first south Asian prime minister.

Let no one say he is not a pioneer in his own right.

SAJID JAVID

LEADER:
Sajid Javid

Javid's story is one of humble beginnings to holding two of the four of 'high offices of state', where he became the first person of colour, never mind south Asian, to occupy the post.

"My father originally was born in Indian Punjab, just south of Jalandhar," Javid told *Pioneers*, "my mother's from Pakistan Punjab."

His father came to the UK alone and settled for a few years before returning home to get married and bring his bride over.

"He arrived at Heathrow [airport], and he had some friends in Birmingham, so he went over to see them, and they said keep going up north young man, because that's where there are jobs.

"There are mills and factories and things that could possibly give you a job.

"So, he carried on until he got to Rochdale where he also knew someone, and that's where my father first settled."

While in Rochdale, his mother gave birth to five sons, and Javid was in the middle.

"It was Rochdale, and it was a very working-class area, and where my parents first settled in, it was also a very South Asian area," he recalled.

"Most of the jobs people did were working in shops, it might be their own shop, they were taxi drivers, mill workers, or other types of factory work."

When he was five or six, the family moved to Bristol.

Javid remembers the time, 1976 probably, sitting in a van without seatbelts with all their belongings, to a place called Downend.

"It was very white, hardly any Asians there, and my father had saved up a lot of money and bought this house.

"But we didn't live in Downend for long, probably for less than a year, because my father decided that he wanted to sell the house so he could open a ladies clothing shop so he could stop doing market stalls, which he had been doing of ladies clothing.

"So, he sold the house and then we moved above the family shop, and we stayed there for a very long time.

"First it was an area called Bedminster, which was a sort of white working-class area, and then a few years later, it was another working-class area called Easton which was much more ethnically diverse."

His parents had bought a shop with a two-bedroom flat above it, and that would be the home to which he referred in his 2019 speech.

It was a rude awakening for the young Javid when he went to primary school, a story he has never told anyone publicly – until now.

"Myself and my brothers, we were the only non-white children in this primary school, and that becomes quite noticeable.

"When I look back now, what I think of is racism in terms of some of the language used, some of the comments made, and actually, even from the teachers.

"A very vivid memory I have is that as Muslims, my parents had told the school that our children don't eat pork, so when it comes to school lunches, please can we avoid pork.

"In those days, the teacher would serve the food, and I remember once I was on the table, me and my brother, the server was not just any old teacher, he was the head teacher, and he was determined to make us eat pork.

"I remember one day where I was so watching him from the corner of my eyes, and I remember for some reason that I didn't quite trust him because of the things he'd said, and the way he behaved around us.

"I remember him putting some mashed potato on the plate, making a little hole in it.

Sajid Javid worked with BBC Radio 4 Today to produce a special podcast on suicide prevention in September 2023; *(below)* During his interaction with cancer patients, survivors and health care professionals at MacMillan Cancer Support in September 2023

"And when he thought I wasn't looking, he chopped up some sausage and hid it in the mashed potatoes and covered it up again, and then handed me the plate.

"I saw this happening, and obviously I didn't eat the pork."

He remembers that it was 1977 and it was the late queen's silver jubilee.

Javid parents were outraged, but they also knew it would be futile to complain, after all this was the headteacher.

So, they said nothing.

But this was not Javid's only brush with racism – other incidents were less subtle.

"On more than one occasion as a child at school we faced racism.

"In one particular incident, where I just joined a new school, it's a secondary school, and I was 11 years old.

"It was my first week there, and I just felt a big punch in the back of my head, and it was a skinhead who hated anyone who wasn't white.

"I fell to the floor, and he just kept kicking me, and I tried to fight back but it's very hard when someone's just smashed you up from the back.

"I had incidents like that, and I had people near school, children, come up to me to ask me for fights after school because they wanted to go P*** bashing, as they put it.

"I grew up with it, so did my brothers, it happened quite often."

It was not just at school where the Javids would be racially attacked.

"My parents ran a business, and they were working in the shop, and I remember people coming in, and if they couldn't get a discount or something they would call you P***, or they would tip something over in the shop and say 'Don't you dare call the police because we'll tell them that you did this or that', and clearly it was racist behaviour.

"The one thing I do remember vividly, it still makes me sad when I think about it because my parents had to really put up with this, was at least a couple of times a year when we'd arrive with my parents at the shop to open it up, the windows would be spray painted with words P*** bastards or P***s get out or something like that.

"Then my mother would spend the best part of the day just trying to take the spray paint off the windows."

The racial incidents affected the young Javid, and in later years he would use his experiences to stand up for others facing racism.

In November 2021, when he was health secretary, he intervened on X, formerly called Twitter, that calling someone a P*** was not banter.

"When I heard about Azeem Rafiq, and some of the racist experience that he had experienced, I could immediately relate to it.

"At the time I was the health secretary, and even though it had nothing to do with my portfolio, just as someone who can, and I guess was in a position of responsibility, I just felt I should say something because it reminded me of many of the types of experiences that I, my brothers and other members of my family and friends have had.

"Later that day, I went back to my office in the health department, and one of the people, a British Asian, walked up to me and said, thank you for saying that.

"This is someone in his early 30s, so still quite young, and he said I was brought up in Yorkshire.

"I was in the youth team for Yorkshire County Cricket Club only a few years ago, and I experienced racism every time when I played at the club.

"And he said, this is not just happening to Azeem, it happens throughout the game with that club, that was his experience."

We must remember that Conservative Party of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s did not welcome with open arms people of colour.

A year before Javid was born the Tory MP for Wolverhampton South West, Enoch Powell, warned of Britain being overrun in his infamous 'rivers of blood' speech.

Yet at university, Javid joined the Conservative Party and attended his first conference when he was 20, in 1990.

"I'd say first that all political parties are a reflection of society," he said.

"We'd had high levels of immigration in Britain, and you can pick examples and moments at any political party, be it Conservative, or Labour, even the Liberal party and pick examples of racism by members of that party including MPs.

"My point is, I don't think throughout history it's an issue around the Conservative party or any other party.

"That said, when I first joined the Conservative Party, I was 18 years old, Margaret Thatcher was prime minister.

"I went to my first Conservative Party conference, and I experienced some racism.

"There was a little bit of reaction, what a fellow like that doing here and things like that. And I'm sure there'll be examples of that in the Labour Party and others."

That did not put him off from embracing his political home, but unlike today, Javid did not become a "professional politician".

After graduating he went into banking, working for global giant Chase Manhattan Bank at its headquarters in New York.

By the time he was 25, he was a vice-president, the youngest ever.

Javid returned to the UK in 1996, where he joined Deutsche Bank; one magazine said he earned £3 million per year.

But by 2009, he knew he wanted a life in politics, and before he knew it, he had been selected for the safe Tory seat of Bromsgrove in the West Midlands.

"It didn't turn out to be that difficult [to be selected], said the MP. "I had three attempts in about three months, and I got selected for Bromsgrove, where I'm very proud to be the MP.

"The first step is to get selected by the local Conservative Party, it was a very contested selection, because it was a seat that was already Conservative, therefore, whoever got selected as the Conservative candidate was expected to become the MP.

"There was a huge amount of competition, but in the end, when I went to what's called the final selection meeting, and the crowd in front of me were all local members, every single one of them white, I won over 70 per cent of the vote that night.

"I didn't go in there with some expectation to win.

"Of course, I had a level of confidence, but I think looking back, the fact that I got 70 per cent of the vote that night, it's not something I would have predicted."

Sajid Javid during his 5th Bromsgrove MP Pensioners' Fair in July 2023; *(below)* at NSPCC to celebrate the passage of the Online Safety Act in November 2023

But why give up a lucrative career, earning millions every year, to become a servant of the people?

The answer is that Javid wanted to give something back to his country, one which he is so proud of.

"I've been able to have those opportunities, because of the advantages of being bought up in Britain.

"Despite the racial challenges when I was a youngster, I also look back at the very positive outcomes, the overwhelmingly positive parts of being British, born in this country.

"That was everything from the support my family received, whether it's from the NHS, the opportunities the country afforded me, being the first in my family to go to university and getting a job with a big bank.

"By 40, I was interested enough in politics to think, you know what, I'm happy to give all this up, if I can do more to help others, and I thought politics was the route to try to help others."

Surprisingly, it was former Tory chair and distinguished author, Lord (Jeffrey) Archer who helped Javid.

"He was someone that I would talk to quite frequently and would give me private advice.

"I remember once during the election campaigning in the high street and someone coming up to me in saying something like your 'I've been a Conservative all my life but I'm not going to vote for you because you're like those Taliban in Afghanistan', and they walked off.

"I just thought what a stupid thing to say, and it's not worth debating with that person.

"I remember mentioning later that day to Jeffrey Archer over the phone, and he said something to me then that I'll never forget, which was, 'Look Sajid, you will always come across people in life that are bigoted and stuff, but when it comes to politics, British people are the most fair minded that you'll ever come across.

"'Just focus on your campaign, and then if you win, just focus on being a good MP for the entire community, and your race will never become an issue.'

"And that's exactly how I felt in Bromsgrove, which it turned out to be, the most welcoming place I could possibly have imagined, where I honestly think I look back over a decade, I don't think my race, or my religion, has ever been an issue with my electorate."

Becoming an MP, he said, was his "pinch me" moment.

In 2010, his party had to partner with the Liberal-Democrats to form a government.

He knew no one, but once again Javid would be plucked out of obscurity and thrive.

"After about six months of being here in parliament, I bumped into George Osborne in an elevator.

"He started asking me a few questions, he knew a bit about my background, he'd heard some speech on TV, or some interview, I'd given and asked me to come and see him for a cup of coffee.

"From that point on, it developed into a lifelong friendship, and so if I had to pick one person that helped me in parliament in terms of mentoring, that would be George Osborne."

Soon he would fly through the ranks under various party leaders.

Economic secretary to the treasury, equalities minister, culture secretary and business secretary all under David Cameron – the latter two were cabinet posts.

Theresa May appointed him as her local government and then home secretary, where he was the first person of colour to hold a high office of state.

Once May was ousted, Javid ran for leadership coming fourth.

But few will forget his persuading the entire

panel to launch an investigation into Islamophobia within the party live on television during the leadership debate.

In the end, in 2019, Boris Johnson, appointed him as his Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Within five months he would resign as a matter of principle when the then prime minister asked him to sack all his special advisers.

Even though he pledged his support to Johnson and his former junior colleague, Rishi Sunak, Javid's resignation letter was telling.

"I believe it is important as leaders to have trusted teams that reflect the character and integrity that you would wish to be associated with," he wrote.

Johnson would ask him to serve again 16 months later after the then health secretary, Matt Hancock, resigned for breaking Covid rules. But in July 2022, he was the first to quit the Johnson cabinet over the appointment of the former MP, Chris Pincher, as deputy chief whip accused of groping two men while he was drunk.

His resignation speech in the House of Commons was devastating, where he said he could not "risk my integrity", telling Boris Johnson "enough is enough", something was "fundamentally wrong" with government, and "the problem starts at the top".

"I was brought up with a certain set of values by my parents, and they passed it on to their children," Javid told *Pioneers*.

"It's around integrity, it's about doing the right thing, being fair to others, that I'm very grateful for to my parents, and that's stuck with me for my life.

"You've given two examples where those values conflicted with what I was being asked to if I carried on in the job.

"I did what I thought was the right thing to do.

"Sometimes people say, well, when you resign, what about your next job? What about this one? Would you give up?

"I always wanted to be chancellor, but if you're being asked to do something that just completely conflicts with your values, it's not something that I could live with, and I have no regrets about those decisions that I've taken."

Javid is truly proud of his protégé and now prime minister, Rishi Sunak.

"I knew Rishi before he became MP, and I liked him immediately, I just thought this is a very smart guy, he's got a lot of good values, similar values to mine, and maybe that's the way he was brought up.

"He becomes an MP, and then I worked with him closely for the first time when I was the local government secretary and he was finance minister in my department. I thought he was one of the best Junior ministers I had.

"When I became chancellor, I asked Boris Johnson if he could be the chief secretary, and I was pleased to have him as the number two in the treasury.

"Then when he was chancellor, I still worked really closely with him, so when he became prime minister, I was pleased, but most of all, I think that it was an historic moment for the country, the first time we have someone not white, the first time someone who's from a south Asian background having the top job.

"I think it was not just an important moment for the UK, but I think for liberal democracies."

Javid will not be an MP after the next election, and you sense that in an era of lightweights, the country has lost a politician of substance.

"I wanted to work hard and see if I could become a minister," he explained.

"I was very fortunate to become a minister early on, and then to become a cabinet minister in 2014, then to get a great office of state a few years later. So, I look back and I feel I've had a good innings, and I've been able to contribute to my country in a way that I could only have imagined ."

Since this interview, Sir Sajid Javid stepped down as an MP and did not contest the 2024 general election.

'Don't have a chip on your shoulder'

HE was the first south Asian chancellor, home secretary, health secretary, business secretary, and culture secretary.

And Sajid Javid told *Pioneers* that with the coronation of the first south Asian prime minister (Rishi Sunak), it is the Conservative Party, rather than Labour, which gives people of colour a chance to progress.

"It tells me that my party, when it comes to who's an MP, who should be a minister, is colourblind.

"Your race doesn't matter, and what matters is what you can tribute to it.

"Whatever that is your skillset that you bring to a job, and I think that is different today than the Labour Party.

"First of all, if you look at almost all ethnic minority MPs in the Labour Party, they are elected in majority ethnic minority constituencies.

"That is not the case at all, in the Conservative Party, and in the Labour Party, to me, it still feels as though, if you're an ethnic minority, and you want to be a Labour MP, you're put into an ethnic minority seat because they think that's what you're capable of doing.

"I still think there's a long way to go broadly in British politics, but I'm proud that it's the Conservative party that's led the way."

His comments are in stark contrast to that of former party chair, Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, who has persistently accused the Tories of being Islamophobic.

Another MP, Nusrat Ghani, also said she was sacked as a junior minister because of her "Muslimness" – although an enquiry found no evidence that the then chief whip, Mark Spencer, had made the comment.

"I'm sure you can find people who will have a different set of experiences to mine," said Javid.

"I can't speak for others, but for me, the attitude I've always taken is don't have a chip on your shoulder about being a certain race or religion or things you are.

"Be proud about it, and just get on with the job. Sometimes, sadly, you might experience some kind of prejudice, which is obviously always a bad thing.

"But if someone is bigoted in that way, there's not much you can do about it, but always have a positive and confident attitude to things.

"I came into parliament, of course, I wanted to be a minister, of course, I would have thought maybe one day I can be in the cabinet. But I just worked hard, and I did my best, and I went through that process, but I can't think of a single time where I thought my race was an issue."

Critics point to the fact that Rishi Sunak, like his predecessor, was not chosen by the country and so has no real mandate to govern.

While some commentators question whether Britain will elect its first south Asian prime minister – something Javid does not think will have a bearing on next year's general election.

"I don't think is a test of racial politics in the UK, I really don't.

"If you look at how far the country has come, take Rishi's constituency in Yorkshire, it's a very white constituency and he's won a rock-solid majority in his constituency.

"That's a sort of electoral verdict, you could say, already on him, in a particular constituency, rather than the country.

"But there's no sense to me at all, that when the Conservative Party is judged at the next election, that the race of its leader is an issue.

"Obviously lots of other things are up for judgment, policies, the future of the country and all that, but I don't think race is going to be an issue."

THE LEGEND: Ramniklal Solanki

RAMNIKLAL SOLANKI

Father of Asian journalism

A powerful voice for the community

> My father always had that mindset that his job was to represent, protect and look after people

IN 1971, the Thames washed up the body of Rokaya Bibi Hazari.

It became clear that she had been murdered, but who killed her and why was a mystery to the man who led the hunt for her killers, the late Detective Superintendent John Swain.

He would write about it in his book, *Being Informed*.

But it was our pioneer, Ramniklal Solanki, after whom this project is named, who would be instrumental in solving the case. "The police identified the body because she was reported missing, and they interviewed the family, the husband and the husband's brother," recalled his son, Shailesh, executive editor of the UK's number one south Asian newspaper, *Eastern Eye*.

"Because of some language difficulties, they couldn't really understand them, but the detective had a feeling that everything wasn't right in that case.

"My father was in touch with the

Ramniklal Solanki *(third from right)* with his family members

detective, and he kept on calling him about the progress on the case.

"The case just stood still, and they didn't have any leads, so after my father spoke to the detective, he said, 'Well, do you mind if I go and interview the family?' And the detective said, 'I don't mind but keep me informed of exactly what's happening.'"

Solanki senior interviewed the family, but every time he asked about the murder, the pair tried to steer the conversation away.

He went several times to speak with the two men and got nowhere.

Eventually, the husband and his brother-in-law concocted a story about how they knew her murderer, but they had escaped to India.

The police checked records of everyone connected to the family who may have fled to India and found it to be untrue.

They took the pair in for questioning and got a confession to murder, thanks to Solanki's tenacity.

"During that time of interviewing the family, my father put his life at risk," said Kalpesh Solanki, the group managing editor of the *Asian Media Group* (AMG).

"As he was getting closer and closer to the truth, there was a stage where, when he went in one of the last times, he was quite nervous about going into the family home to interview them, and they threatened him.

Ramniklal Solanki with wife Parvatiben

"My father didn't know that the police were outside undercover, in vans, in case something happened to him.

"He didn't know that, and he still put his life in danger to uncover the truth, which is remarkable.

"He actually solved the murder, because it was his relentless journalism in talking to the various family members and getting a confession that they knew who murdered the young woman."

It would be in 2007, more than 30 years after helping to solve a murder that the then Met police commissioner, Sir Ian Blair, would honour this humble man.

Ramniklal Solanki was born in Gujarat in 1931, and he would become a tax collector, going from city to city.

He earned the reputation of being incorruptible. By 1964, he had got a visa to work in Britain, and months before it expired, he made his way to London where he lived with his brother-in-law.

He worked as an office administrator by day, but in every spare moment he would pursue his passion – writing and journalism.

The Mumbai-based *Janmabhoomi Group* of newspapers hired Solanki to be its London correspondent to tell the stories of Gujaratis who had moved to Britain in search of a better life.

Like many south Asian immigrant families of the time, he worked, scrimped and saved and brought his beloved wife and four children to the UK.

When his family arrived in 1967, he worked as an assistant timekeeper.

Once again, like hundreds of south Asian immigrants, the employers did not consider that this was a man with two degrees and other qualifications where he would be the leader rather than someone subservient.

Solanki never forgot his roots, and it was in every core of his being that he helped others less fortunate.

"My father would help quite a lot of people who got stuck at immigration at the airport or was in trouble with the law, without any help," Kalpesh Solanki recalled.

"He wouldn't ask for any money at all, even if people offered money, he wouldn't take it, so he's always had that mindset that his job was to represent, protect and look after people."

Solanki senior would offer lodgings to people who had just arrived in the UK, helping them to get on their feet in a strange land.

Shailesh Solanki told *Pioneers,* "There's an enormous challenge really, to come to this country because it takes huge courage to live a life that you're quite comfortable to an unknown country.

Ramniklal Solanki with late Queen Elizabeth II

"It was quite a hostile environment in the 1960s, this is just before Enoch Powell's rivers of blood speech, so it wasn't a welcoming environment.

"The weather wasn't welcoming, no Indian food, he obviously spoke English quite well, but it was very, very difficult and quite a lonely life because there was a very small Indian community here at the time."

The family lived in west London, and the children remembered that they were one of two households to have a car.

Their parents encouraged them to integrate and being the only south Asians on their street they played and mixed with their white neighbours.

They did not face racism, indeed they made a difference to their neighbours.

"I'd do the shopping for Mrs Jones every Saturday," said Sadhana Karia, who was 11 when she came to the UK.

"She would give me sixpence, and sometimes I wouldn't take it, but she would give me lists of things.

"She was very particular that she wanted Madeira cake from Marks and Spencer, her cherry jam from Sainsbury's.

"It was nice, it was fun doing shopping, and my parents were happy that we were helping."

All of Ramniklal Solanki's children were clear that their father and mother loved Britain and India, and they were also loyal to the south

Asian communities who would settle there.

In 1968, the then Indian high commissioner, Dr Jivraj Mehta urged Solanki to start a Gujarati newspaper to serve the burgeoning Indian community in Britain.

They had no financial backing and no equipment to start a newspaper, yet from their terraced home, *Garavi Gujarat*, a cyclo-styled, black and white newssheet, was born.

It was a family affair.

"Mum would have done the address labels, the wraps, so you just folded the paper, wrapped it glued it," Karia remembered.

"The glue was made of chapati flour and water, and then we'd put it in the sacks by the letterbox outside our house until the postman came to collect the sacks.

"Sometimes I'd have to stay home and not go to school to make sure that the postman collected it because papa and mummy still had jobs as well.

"Papa would go every weekend to the Midlands, Birmingham or Leicester, everywhere by train and carrying this heavy holdall with copies of *Garavi Gujarat*.

"He had his weekend clothes, which I would pack for him, and he'd go, and then the Indian friends that were living in other places, they would take papa in their car and door to door, getting new readers and subscribers."

His ambition was to unite and integrate the community and to keep India's rich cultural heritage and the Gujarati language alive for future generations.

Kalpesh Solanki remembered the hours his father put in.

"In those days there was no such thing as marketing, so my father's brilliance was that on the Friday he would go by coach to one of the city's Leicester, Walsall, Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Ashton-under-Lyne, Preston, Bolton.

"He would just travel relentlessly every weekend, and I remember that when he came back on Sunday, the four of us were on the bed with my mum in their bedroom.

"My father would say right here, the subscriptions, here's the cash, and then there would be two Mars bars, which the four of us would have to share.

"In every town and city where he went, there would be some Indian person, a community leader who would take him around door to door, and that word of mouth going door to door spread like wildfire, people wanted to subscribe.

"They would pay, I think it was about a shilling or something in those days."

Ramniklal Solanki with Indian film stars Rajesh Khanna, Amitabh Bachchan and Raj Kapoor

Ramniklal Solanki with former British prime ministers Gordon Brown and Margaret Thatcher *(below)*

The family learnt on the job by listening to people. For example, after speaking with the postman they found a cheaper way to send off the newspaper subscriptions.

"We had newspapers all around us at home," said Shailesh Solanki, AMG's executive editor.

"The way we used to do the layout, the type setting, that was in our old dining room.

"You knew from the morning that we'd get up, and you'd see the production process of the newspaper everywhere you looked in the house."

Solanki was also an unusual man in that unlike other south Asians, he treated his wife, Parvatiben, as an equal.

The journalist had a very punishing schedule, according to his children.

He would be up at four in the morning, make tea for his wife, and they would discuss the editorial stance for this fledgling newspaper.

That teamwork continued throughout their lives, and she was instrumental in the newspaper's success.

"In 1976, my father bought a 17,000 square foot building in central London," said eldest son, Kalpesh Solanki. "He didn't need the space, he just probably needed 2,000 square feet, but he just thought big.

"But my mum was the backbone in terms of decision making and she would decide, right, if we need it, let's buy it.

"And that was throughout our lives, every single big investment, whether it's capital expenditure in machinery, or whatever it was, it was my mum who would be the decision maker saying right, let's go ahead with it."

With mass immigration from the Indian subcontinent, the hunger for news from back home and letting those in India know about like in the UK only grew.

In 1972, Ugandan president, Idi Amin, expelled up to 80,000 Asians and about 30,000 made their way to Britain.

It was then that *Garavi Gujarat* came into its own, remember Solanki's children.

"Each issue of *Garavi Gujarat* would be the first draft of history of our communities, and he was obviously quite heavily involved," explained Shailesh Solanki.

"When Idi Amin threw out the Asians, my father went around the camps where they were housed, to talk to them, to help them integrate into the community.

"At that moment, *Garavi Gujarat* was fortnightly, after the expulsions it became a weekly.

"I remember going to some of those camps with my father, as a little boy and it was just fascinating watching him, just talking to people with ease.

"He didn't have an ego, like I am the editor of *Garavi Gujarat*, nothing like that at all.

"He never boasted, no matter how much he

Ramniklal Solanki with former Indian prime ministers Indira Gandhi and Morarji Desai *(right)*

acquired, all he ever talked about was his readership, and he wanted to see first-hand the conditions in which the Ugandan refugees were being housed. So that's why he went to quite a few of the refugee camps, to see the conditions but also then to understand what the difficulties would be.

"Then he would be writing articles in terms of helping them adapt to British life once they left those camps as well."

It was not just about reflecting new lives in a new country, Solanki was also clear he wanted to hold power to account.

"The politicians took note of the size of the readership, and he had those political connections.

"He would write to them and ask them relentless questions to make sure that they were held to account.

"For example, the British government introduced virginity tests for spouses who wanted to come to the UK from the Indian subcontinent, and this was plainly very discriminatory legislation. So, he ran a campaign in the newspaper against those tests, and eventually they were overturned.

"The primary purpose rule in terms of immigration, was another one.

"What was the reason for a spouse to come to the UK, whether it's a male or female, was it to settle in the UK, or was it the marriage?

"Again, he campaigned against that, because that was introduced to stop people of colour coming from the Indian subcontinent or Commonwealth countries coming to the UK.

"That was eventually overturned as well.

"In terms of political power, he interviewed every single British prime minister from Harold Wilson's first administration to Tony Blair.

"That's quite a feat to be interviewing every single prime minister, and it wasn't just what would you like to tell the community – it was challenging them and holding them to account."

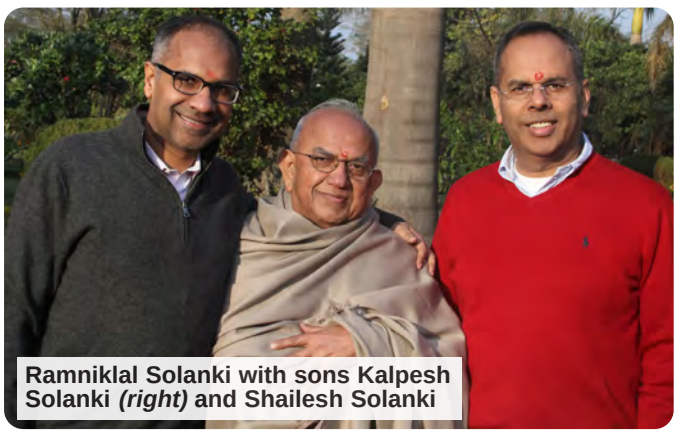
By the 1980s, south Asians were renowned for opening shops 24-7-365 days, but they were not being treated fairly.

"The news wholesalers operated on something called sale or return," he continued. "If you didn't sell a certain number of newspapers and magazines, you would then return them back and there was always a dispute between the retailers and the whole service in terms of the number of copies they were sending back.

> Then he would be writing articles in terms of helping them to adapt British life

"Asian retailers then started getting a reputation that they weren't always very straight forward, so the treatment they were getting was highly discriminatory in terms of both manufacturers and wholesalers.

"If one of the smaller Asian cash and carry groups went bankrupt, you'd find all the other larger established Asian cash and carries getting their credit turned up because they thought all the agents are the same."



Ramniklal Solanki with sons Kalpesh Solanki *(right)* and Shailesh Solanki

In 1984, out of a scare came an opportunity – something Solanki could never have imagined – the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) targeted the makers of the Mars Bars.

The ALF claimed that Mars tested the sugar content on monkeys.

Kalpesh Solanki remembered it well.

"There was this poisonous scare with the Mars bar and there was a guy called Lionel Cashin who went around some of the shopkeepers and said right, how do we get the message across to retailers that there's a poison scare in the Mars bar and take them off shelves?

"So, a lot of the retailers pointed Lionel to my father, so he met my father and said, look, we need to get the Mars bars off the shelves.

"They became friends and started talking about why not have a publication specifically for the retailing community."

In 1985, Solanki founded *Asian Trader*, and it remains immensely successful today, accounting for 75 per cent of the independent retail sector.

"It was fascinating, you could see this community growing in terms of Asian retailers and the current publications weren't actually reaching them or engaging with them.

"Today *Asian Trader* is a phenomenal brand, it's just incredible how entrenched it is within the food and drink sector, reaching all these thousands of retailers, but also a majority of the suppliers and wholesalers."

Like all his publications, Solanki mantra was that they were there to be of service to the different communities.

By keeping it focused and simple, Solanki pioneered and played his part in changing Britain.

The open-all-hours south Asian culture was a prime example.

"That brought about the convenience revolution, which then the government decided to legislate on called the Sunday trading laws," explained Kalpesh Solanki.

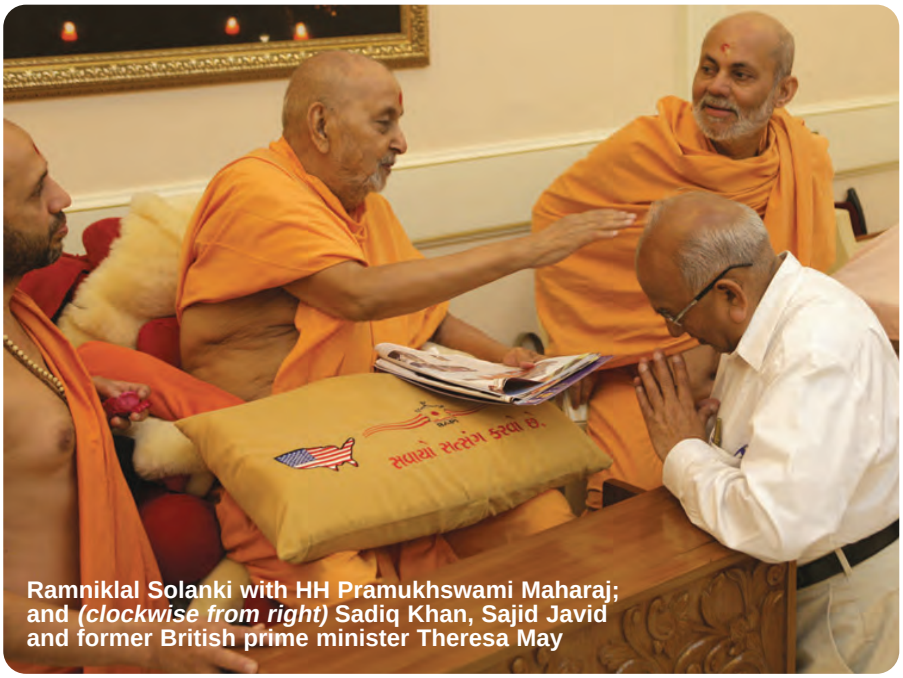
"We've documented all this through *Asian Trader*, and we bring people together."

It also resulted in having a power to put right wrongs and misunderstandings.

"At one stage the *Sun* had printed, an article just condemning Hindus, and some retailers really took offense at this.

"So, we gave that message the oxygen it needed, and thousands of retailers decided not to sell the *Sun* for a few days.

"They actually got the delivery of the *Sun*, put it below the counter, no copies of the *Sun* were being sold by news agents.



Ramniklal Solanki with HH Pramukhswami Maharaj; and *(clockwise from right)* Sadiq Khan, Sajid Javid and former British prime minister Theresa May

"Now this is a giant organisation being brought to its knees by retailers who worked together – unheard of.

"Since those days, the *Times* group that owns the *Sun* respects these retailers because they have a power if they work together, and that togetherness is what we bring as *Asian Trader*."

The empire grew with the founding of *Pharmacy Business* in 1998.

Solanki also 's most recent acquisition was *Eastern Eye*, a newsweekly, and the *Asian Rich List* in 2009.

His legacy should not be underestimated.

Throughout our four-hour conversation with his remaining children, it became clear that Ramniklal Solanki had a leadership style which inspired people.

Throughout, they stressed their father's humility; his insistence in being a servant for his readers; his ability to show that they, not he, were important. Absolute selflessness.

Absolute trust in your abilities was another trait, his eldest son recalled.

"His style was discussing an idea and then go and do it, and he gave us a lot of room to make mistakes, it's fine, just carry on, it didn't stop us if we made a mistake.

"I remember the very first time I think I just qualified as a barrister, and he took me to meeting with Booker.

"I didn't know what I was doing because he didn't drive so I had to drive him, and then they were in the meeting.

"My father spoke for 15 minutes, he introduced himself, introduced me, and then she said, my son Kalpesh will tell you all about *Asian Trader*.

"I thought what the hell – it was just learn on the job, but he was right there if you needed him."

Solanki's children believe their father would have been pleased to see the first south Asian British prime minister, how successful the communities have become, and their positive contribution to his adopted home.

They believe it is the south Asian pioneers, like their father, who have laid the foundations to make this country a better place for their children, grandchildren and now great-grandchildren.

"It shows a remarkable progress in terms of when my parents first came to where we are today," Shailesh Solanki concluded.

"Three of the four great offices of state are now occupied by people of colour, so that truly is a remarkable achievement.

"For a young person growing up to see a south Asian prime minister, an Asian mayor in London, a south Asian first minister of Scotland, shows that there are no barriers to what you can achieve in this country.

"But having said that, that doesn't solve all the problems that we have.

"We have strong representation at the very top of government, but if you look at the levers just below government in terms of the senior civil service, if you look at the military, you look at the police forces, you look at the judiciary.

"There aren't that many people of colour occupying those positions.

"Look at the NHS, 40,000 Asian doctors, but very, very few in the levers of power.

"So, there's still a long way to go, but you can't deny that we have made significant advancement and probably more progress than most other European countries."

Kalpesh Solanki told *Pioneers* that one particular story really summed up his father.

"We could see the way that my father would interact, whether it was an interaction with the prime minister or a reader, it was the same.

"It wasn't like, 'Oh my God, this is the prime minister, it didn't matter to him.

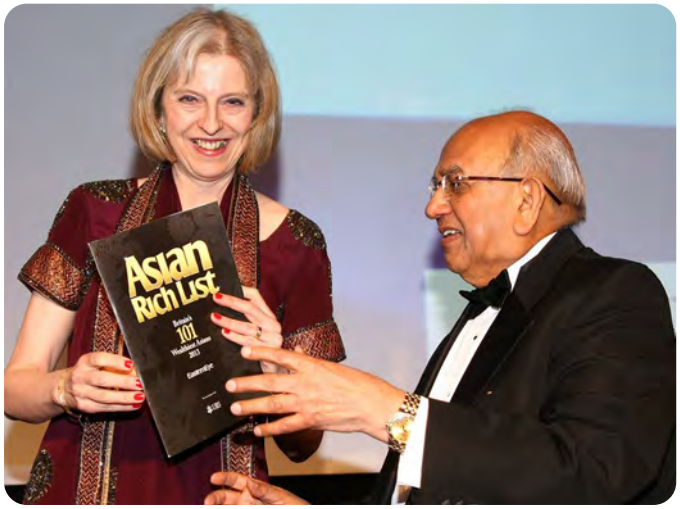
"I remember when Nick Clegg, deputy prime minister, was at the GG2 Leadership and Diversity Awards dinner and sat next to my father.

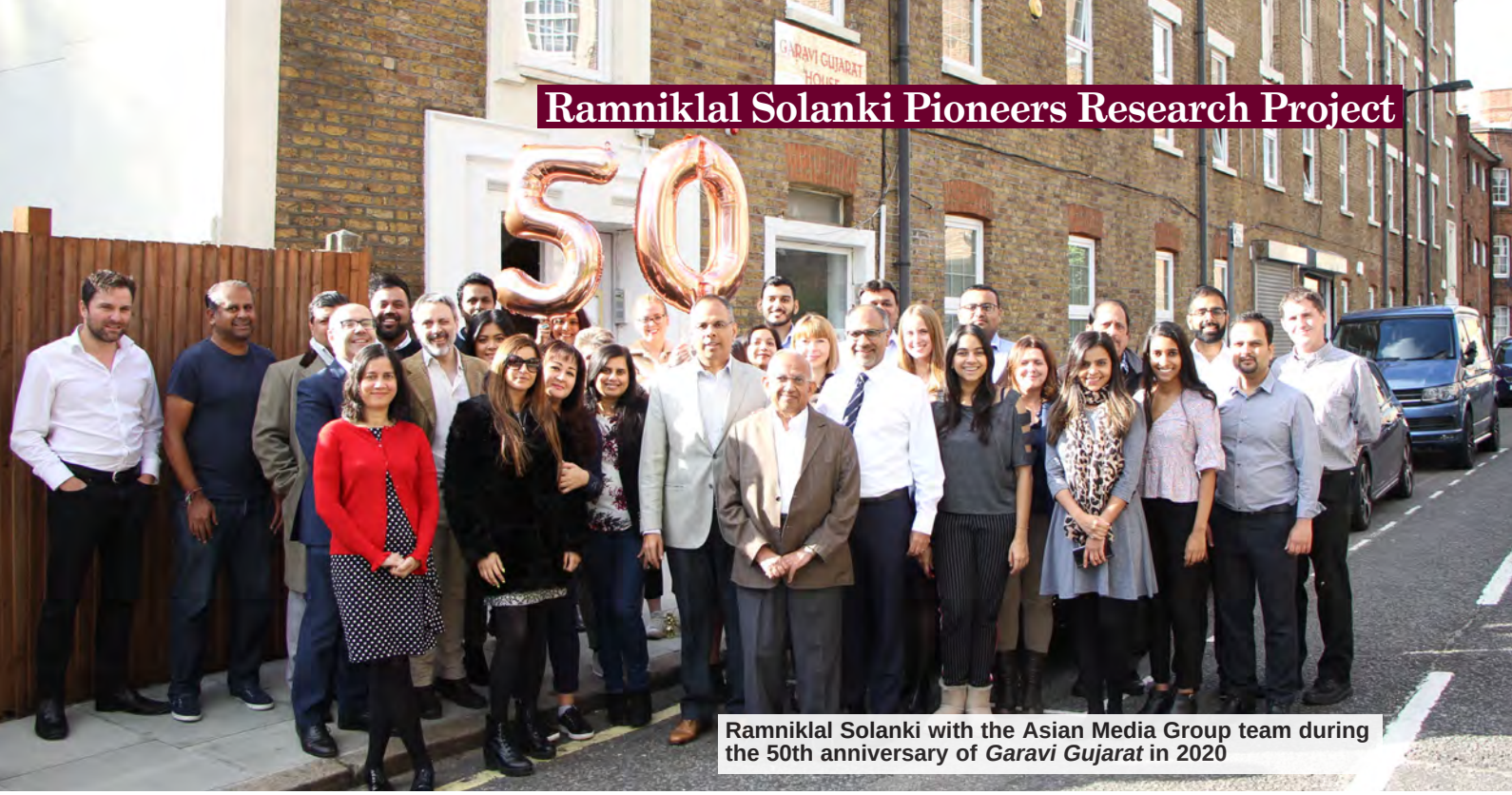
"My father asked him, do you have a card?

"And Nick says, no, I don't, so my father took out pen and paper and said, 'Here write it down.'

"Nick Clegg didn't know what hit him, so he just wrote his name down.

"My dad said, 'Go on write your mobile and e-mail down', it didn't bother him that this was the deputy prime minister."





Ramniklal Solanki with the Asian Media Group team during the 50th anniversary of *Garavi Gujarat* in 2020

'Organisations must engage with ethnic press'

MAINSTREAM businesses, the government and civil service are missing a trick by not engaging with ethnic media, according to the children of pioneer, Ramniklal Solanki.

Both his sons, Kalpesh and Shailesh, who now run the Asian Media Group, concluded that it was the pandemic which brought home the gulf in the lack of knowledge that some organisations had when it came to getting vital messages to south Asian communities.

Eastern Eye, one of AMG's titles, was the first newspaper to spot the disproportionate number of south Asian frontline doctors dying from Covid.

Through the British Medical Association, the doctors' union, it exposed how medics of colour were being mistreated.

Medical experts highlighted and praised the work of both *Garavi Gujarat* and *Eastern Eye* during a Downing Street news conference.

They said that the publications reached places the government could not.

"It really did highlight the importance of the ethnic press, because the government had a real issue in terms of how you reach out to the south Asians who were disproportionately impacted by Covid," said Shailesh Solanki.

"A huge number of deaths amongst our communities, the government didn't know how to reach out to them.

"It was far more important than just getting the message out as the messenger – who was giving that message was equally as important as the message itself.

"They didn't really understand how, what was happening, how they should really deal with this issue, and I think they did try to suppress some of that news.

"Obviously, we did hold them to account as well with the data journalism that we were doing in terms of the impact of Covid among south Asian communities."

For his brother, it proved that no one was thinking strategically about how to communicate vital messages to communities which did not engage with mainstream news outlets.

"You look at the intention that politicians have, during Covid they said the one aim was to get the message out to the community.

"Civil servants and all the various middlemen got involved, but who was actually thinking about, were they reaching all the communities?

"Why are some parts of the Asian communities hard to reach?

"It's because nobody's bothered, in the middle, to find out how we communicate with them, how do we engage with them?

"And it's essential for organisations like the Asian Media Group to be able to say, this is how you engage with the communities, because we show them a simple route.

"It's not complicated, it's not really hard to reach.

"It's only hard to reach because, one, they haven't thought about it and, two, they're not executing a strategy that politicians talk about.

"It took a conversation with Michael Gove, at that time to say, 'Listen, you guys aren't actually doing anything about communicating with the Asian communities.'

"Then things started to change."

The brothers stressed that in almost every area, the lack of engagement had a cost.

The problem, said Kalpesh Solanki, was that throughout the country, leaders make decisions which are not followed through by those in the middle.

"We've had conversations with Ford, for example, and their agency MindShare, and their intention was right.

"How do they communicate and provide a service to Asian communities?

"They had no idea, so there's an intention by Ford – their middlemen, one of the big advertising agencies in the world, but they didn't know either how to didn't know how.

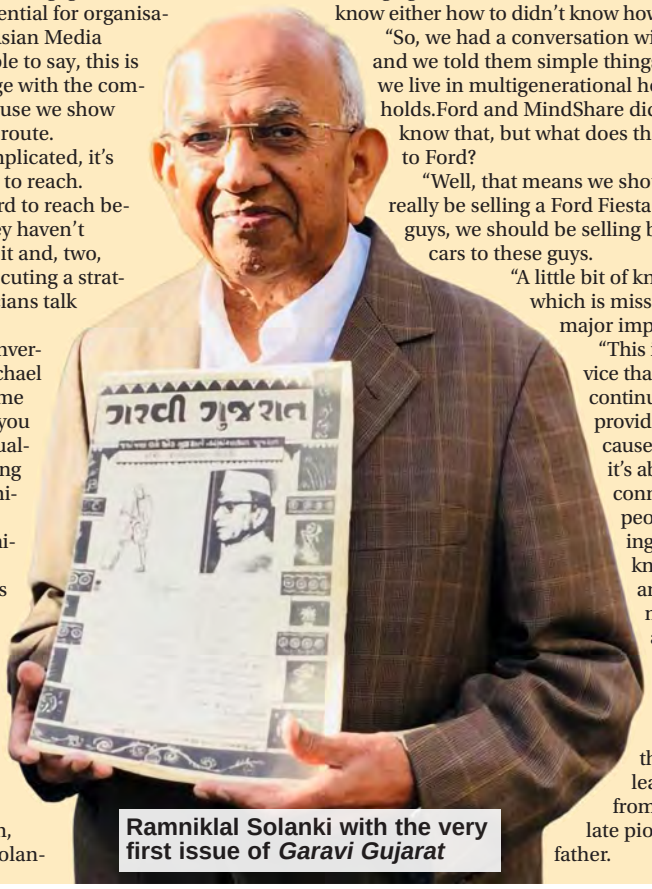
"So, we had a conversation with them, and we told them simple things such as we live in multigenerational households.Ford and MindShare didn't know that, but what does that mean to Ford?

"Well, that means we shouldn't really be selling a Ford Fiesta to these guys, we should be selling bigger cars to these guys.

"A little bit of knowledge which is missing has a major impact.

"This is a service that we continue to provide, because for us, it's about connecting people, giving them knowledge and information and empowering them."

Something they learnt from their late pioneering father.



Ramniklal Solanki with the very first issue of *Garavi Gujarat*

POLICE STORY:
Neil Basu

NEIL BASU

> I had to do a u-turn on institutional racism

Unafraid to challenge

Police officer who kept the country safe

TO understand Neil Basu, this country's first south Asian former head of counter terrorism, you must first understand his parents' journey.

In the UK of the 1960s, people would openly have signs on their window which would read, "No Irish, No Black, No Dogs".

It is the era of mass immigration from the countries where Britain had colonised as part of its empire and soon to hear that infamous 'rivers of blood' speech by the Wolverhampton MP, Enoch Powell.

"My father was incredibly reserved and quiet," Basu told the *Ramniklal Solanki Pioneers Project*, "so he never told me anything about his disappointments or his great triumphs, all of the things that he'd had to experience being an immigrant into this country in 1961."

"I've learned all from my mother, bear in mind when I was born in 1968, one month before that [rivers

of blood] speech, and that speech changed my parents' lives."

His father was a Hindu doctor from, what was then, Calcutta in India, while Basu's mother was an Irish nurse from Wales.

They met over an operating table in Leamington Spa, two years after his father had won a medical scholarship to the UK.

"I think once he came here, he wanted to make a success of it, but he wanted his children to be English and to be proud of being British people, and he succeeded in that.

"We are proud to be British people, but we have grown up with our eyes wide open about things that have happened to us.

"Like everyone else, you don't think they happen to your parents, you think you're unique, and the things I've found out about my parents was so awful.

"It makes me glad that I was born when I was born, because it was getting better. And it makes me glad that my children won't have to suffer the things I had to suffer."

Basu's maternal grandparents could not have been more different during a period of blatant racism.

They welcomed this mixed-race couple with open arms because an Indian soldier saved Basu's great-grandfather's life in World War One.

That mixed race relationship created some challenges for the young Basu.

"It's very hard when you don't feel comfortable in a room full of white people, and you don't feel comfortable in a room full of Indians when you're a kid.

"You don't know which you're supposed to be, and we were never taught either languages, so I don't speak Welsh, I speak no words of Hindi, and we weren't raised to speak those languages or to follow the religions."

Basu and his parents did face racism and he remembers one incident from his childhood while growing up in Stafford, where the family eventually settled.

"I was once kicked out of a jewellery store where my mother was buying a piece of jewellery and the sales assistant shouted at me to leave using words I will not describe in this interview.

"Obviously I didn't realise, because my mother's white, that we were together.

"My mother had her *Pretty Woman* moment, you know, I hope you're working on commission because I won't be buying this now, and don't ever speak to my son like that again."

Decades later, his parents still faced racism.

"While my father was still alive, he was packing my mother's trolley in a supermarket Sainsbury's in Stafford.

"The checkout assistant looked at my mother and said that a strange man was fiddling around with her trolley.

"I know he's strange, she said, I've been married to him 50 years, but I have all of that all kinds of things that people like me get."

Basu told *Pioneers* that he was a "painfully shy" child, and he is adamant that he remains so to this day.

Growing up as a mixed race child of the 1970s was difficult, but it was his mother's words which still resonate today.

> I knew what it was like being the only person of colour in a room

"I was being racially abused by older boys, and I came to the car in tears, and my mother was asking what's going on?

"I said, well, they called me these names, and I don't really understand what's going on.

"She sat me down and said, whatever happens in the future, remember, it's not your fault. It's theirs.

"I love her so much for that because she's 81 and she remembers.

"How hard it must have been for a white mother to be sitting with a little Indian kid trying to explain to them why people are racially abusing them, it must have been incredibly tough."

Yet Basu is clear, he had a wonderful childhood, and here is the point of all his anecdotes.

He realised early on that to get on in a racially divided Britain, he had to adapt and fit in, with sport being his way in.

To avoid being targeted or bullied, Basu used weights to become beefier.

By the time he got to Hendon to train with the Metropolitan Police he was 25 his height and build made him perfect to play for the force's rugby team.

"You fit in or get out," he explained, "in every team I've played, I've been the only person of colour in that team.

"If you think about the American expression jocks, you think about the way that sports teams behave, the alpha behaviour, the macho behaviour and bullying behaviour, it is an incredibly difficult thing to get through unless you can fit in.

"So, can you be as sharp with your tongue as anyone else, can you stand up for yourself rather than be bullied?

"Now I played as footballer I was a centre-half and, as a rugby player, I was a tight-head prop, so, I was generally speaking one of the biggest people in the team.

"I had the size, and I had the intellect to be able to deal with the banter."

Basu joined Hendon, the Met's police training college, in 1992, and it asked him to become the poster boy for the force.

His mentor, a south Asian female sergeant was not happy when he agreed, because others, such as a turban-wearing Sikh or a black trainee, were not the acceptable face of the force.

To this day, said Basu, he did not know why he agreed to do it.

"I knew what it was like being the only person of colour in a room.

"I thought if anyone sees the front cover of this brochure and decides to join the police, because they see an Indian man on it, then I would have done my bit for diversity.

"That's more important than being a token, as she [his mentor] put it, being a 'token darkie' which is what the commandant was doing.

"I didn't know whether it was ego because I thought this was a good thing. I'm an ambitious person, and I work hard, and I thought is there a bit of ego?

"Then I genuinely thought, well, this is my chance to give something back without being a kind of an activist."

At some point, he said, someone spotted he had a degree, which was unusual at that time.

This meant the Home Office invited him to try out for the graduate programme, which would mean his accelerating through the service.

The Home Office selected Basu, but he kept his achievement quiet knowing the reception it would get from colleagues.

Throughout his career, the former assistant commissioner said he had to work harder and smarter than his colleagues.

He was a sergeant who was part of the Met's group which would have to respond to the Macpherson report into the murder of the black teenager, Stephen Lawrence.

On the day of the report's publication the Black Police Association tried and failed to recruit him.

It would have been "quite a coup", Basu acknowledged.

"I was very practical about my own survival,"

Neil Basu after receiving the man of the year award in 2018

A mural of George Floyd along the Lansing River trail

he explained. "If I take this on, is anyone going to take it seriously?

"All I'll get out of it is I'll be known as a troublemaker.

"This is still a massive problem with internal grievance and complaint procedures, I don't care what the organisation is, people don't want to report that they're being bullied, harassed, being treated badly, and I didn't get a lot of that.

"Other people did – one of my colleagues came back after a late shift to find a burning cross in the backyard of the police station.

"I didn't get any of that kind of treatment, the people who came in the years before me, when I say the years before me just a few years ahead of me, had faeces smeared on their lockers, things written on their lockers which were disgusting, police wore National Front badges openly on their uniform.

"By the 1990s, when allegedly, political correctness is really kicking it, society has decided we can't do any of that publicly, it didn't mean it didn't exist underground, but it wasn't public.

"And if you wanted to prove that this is still a problem today, you've got to prove that somebody's treating you badly because it's of your race or your gender, or your ethnicity or your sexuality.

"It's incredibly difficult to prove because people don't do it overtly.

"So, you can go through lots of heartache, lots of time, ruining your career, not going anywhere, your mental health suffering, and I decided very early on in life, that wasn't going to be me."

He disagreed that the Met was institutionally racist, and it would be years later before he would start to speak up about it.

Basu revealed that it was his former boss, Dame Cressida Dick, who pointed out that he had performed a u-turn in later years.

"I've been speaking about institutional racism since 1998, but nobody listened.

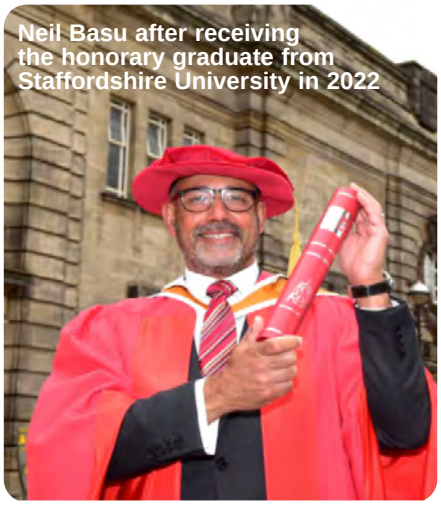
"What changed was I became very important as I got promoted.

"I was probably the third loudest voice in policing behind the commissioner and the director-general of the National Crime Agency.

"I did want to believe that policing was no longer institutionally racist.

"A lot of my critics who said I'd done a u-turn, they're right.

"I said, I don't think we're institutionally racist, full of racist and misogynists and homophobes.


Neil Basu after receiving the honorary graduate from Staffordshire University in 2022

"I can be defensive, because I'm not a chief constable anymore, no chief constable can say this, but it's a tiny minority.

"It is not what it was like in 60s 70s and 80s, policing has massively improved.

"There are still these monsters in our midst that we shouldn't have let in, that we should have spotted, that we should have fired, but it's a much smaller proportion of our workforce.

"We'd done some great things, so I was prepared to say, we're not anymore.

"But the trouble is, and I started looking at this a lot from 2012 onwards, I did a diversity health check with the Metropolitan Police where I looked at all our facts and figures and said we're still looking like were totally disproportionate in the way we police, the way we use force when we stop and search."

Things changed with George Floyd, the black American whose murder by a white police officer was captured on film.

A judge jailed former police officer, Derek Chauvin, to more than 22 years, after he knelt on Mr Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes during his arrest.

Basu revealed that a black, female officer "shamed" and "embarrassed" him into writing to his Metropolitan Police colleagues about the impact of the killing among ethnic minority officers.

He wrote an internal blog which was immediately leaked to the *Daily Mail*, so Basu sent it to *The Guardian*, which printed it in full.

"Very few chief constables said anything publicly about what was going on, and ever since that day I have been inundated with offers to speak and mentor.

"So, I've listened to black and brown and female voices all up and down the country.

"I already knew that communities felt we were institutionally racist, but black and brown voices in your own professional are telling you that they still feel exactly the same way as they felt, it's impossible to ignore.

"What's very different from 1992, when I joined the police is that that 100 per cent of the black brown and female officers and staff all had their own personal horror story.

"Now that's not true, it's probably about 50 per cent, but that's still great progress, but still not good enough.

"When I heard all that, I had to do a u-turn.

"I had to say, listen to the voices and listen to the community, look at our facts and figures, we are still exactly what Macpherson accused us of."

The former head of counter terrorism also spoke about his disappointment that his chief officer colleagues failed to support him in bringing reforms to the profession he served for 30 years.

He took his concerns to the police chiefs' council in December 2021, urging them to say sorry, which they refused to do.

That rejection was one of the reasons he left policing.

He said some colleagues tried to persuade him to stay and influence change from within.

But the officer, who reached the rank of chief constable, said he realised he was no longer making a difference in shifting the debate or position on racism in the service.

Basu told the *Pioneers Project* that some chief constables were too scared to admit they had a problem with racism.

"I reckon a third of chief constables in the country get it and will publicly vote for saying we are sorry, we need to do something about it.

"I think the third believe that but are too scared to say it because they worry about their workforce backlash.

"They worry about communities using it against them and saying, I told you, you're even admitting you're racist, instead of actually saying, finally, you've admitted it.

"But I think the other third don't care about this, and I find that as a professional cop for 30 years difficult to deal with."

The former Met assistant commissioner also revealed that although others tried to persuade him to apply for the vacant commissioner's job when his friend and mentor, Cressida Dick, resigned, he never wanted the job.

"Not only can I not do anymore, but it made no difference.

"On December the 16th 2021, I realised it made no difference.

"I would have only applied for it [commissioner's job] and taken it if my number one priority would have been professional standards and improving the diversity of the Met as a bellwether sign to the rest of the chiefs in the country that the Met is taking this seriously, so you'd better take it seriously too.

"If I wanted to do that job, risk my mental health, risk my physical health, to take on the world's most pressured policing job.

"And of course, with this political administration, do you think I would have even passed the interview if I had said that?"

Perhaps one of the most surprising admissions Basu made during a two-hour long conversation was that he was a "functioning alcoholic".

The pressure of being the responsible for foiling terror attack took its toll.

He still blames himself for the terror campaigns which succeeded, such as the bombing carried out at the Manchester Arena by Salman Abedi, despite knowing that it is irrational.

"I'm lucky because I'm not one of those people who had a breakdown, but I was massively overcompensating during my career with all of the coping mechanisms, you should never do.

"I was heavy chain smoker for 30 years, I'm now a severe chronic asthmatic because of it.

"I was what I described as a high functioning alcoholic. Like a lot of detectives, I drank a great deal, I didn't drink on duty, but after work I liked to drink a great deal.

"All of those things made me physically very unfit from a guy was a very successful sportsman until my 20s.

"From my early 30s to my early 50s, I pretty much couldn't do sport because I didn't have the lung power for it.

"That's not a good thing to do to yourself."

Today, he is giving back to his fellow professional by being a trustee of Police Care UK, a charity which helps former and serving staff.

"I've seen things nobody should see, and I think about them a lot.

"I was regularly having nightmares, I was waking up all the time, and until a couple of months ago, my average sleep would have been between five and six hours, and not a lot of it restful.

"Within two months of returning, my blood pressure's normal, my resting heart rate is 10 beats lower.

"I'm phenomenally fitter just from not doing that job anymore – the effect of policing on individuals is brutal."

Politicians should stop interfering with policing

THE former assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Neil Basu, has urged politicians to stop interfering in policing.

Neil Basu was Britain's top south Asian cop, and he was favourite to take over as the director of the National Crime Agency (NCA).

But he was stopped from getting the top job after the then prime minister, Boris Johnson, said he wanted former Met commissioner, Lord (Bernard) Hogan-Howe in that post.

In the end neither man was successful.

Basu told *Pioneers* that he was disappointed not to land the role.

"I'll be massively arrogant for a moment," he said, "my entire professional thought I was the outstanding candidate for that job.

"So much so that there's only a handful of chief constables in the country, and the advert was written for a senior police officer with organised crime experience.

"There were probably only three or four other candidates in the country who had my CV for that job, and none of them would apply against me.

"In fact, they all supported me to do that job, so yes, I was a top candidate.

"I had never intended to apply for that job, I actually intended to retire.

"I'd been told that I had zero chance of ever being commissioner Metropolitan Police while Boris Johnson was prime minister and Priti Patel was home secretary.

"I pretty much realised that I got zero chance of being director general of the NCA, because obviously, you're working directly to the home secretary.

"They're not going to give me the commissioner of the Met, why would they give me director general of the NCA?"

Despite this, friends in the NCA, and Basu's wife, persuaded him to take look at how the agency had changed over the past five years. Once he did what he called "due diligence" Basu told *Pioneers* that he wanted the job.

"I spent five months from start to finish through the application process.

"I don't know whether this is true or not, my understanding was that I certainly was one of the top two appointable candidates in my process.

"Then I was rung up to say that the home secretary had decided not to appoint anybody, but she was going to rerun the process, please reapply.

"I thought that was an extraordinary thing to happen, and I said, well, I won't be reapplying because it's now obvious to me that what I suspected was correct.

"An expert panel had no qualms about saying that I was appointable for that job.

"Three days before I was told I couldn't be director general of the NCA, I was chosen the keynote speaker to end their [senior civil service] conference by their permanent secretary.

"So, it was a really weird timing, and then the *Sunday Times* wrote an article effectively saying that Number 10 had interfered in the process with the Home Office, because their preferred candidate Bernard Hogan-Howe had not been given the job.

"I have no evidence whether that's true or not, but I've been told the *Sunday Times* story was accurate and has never been denied by the home office."

Basu told *Pioneers* that this smacked of "cronyism".

"I don't blame Bernard, unless he was in a deal with Boris, but I don't think he was.

"I think he probably would have been Boris's preferred candidate because he was his commissioner when Boris was London mayor, and they worked very closely together.

"Why wouldn't Boris want somebody he knew and trusted, who had delivered for him in policing in the past?

"But I'm a grown up, you could have told me that five months ago, and I wouldn't have applied. Don't run what you think is an open and transparent process, if that's not what you're actually running."

It was when he complained that he realised that the law had changed in 2011 to make ministerial appointments of certain positions and there was no need to run an open and transparent process.

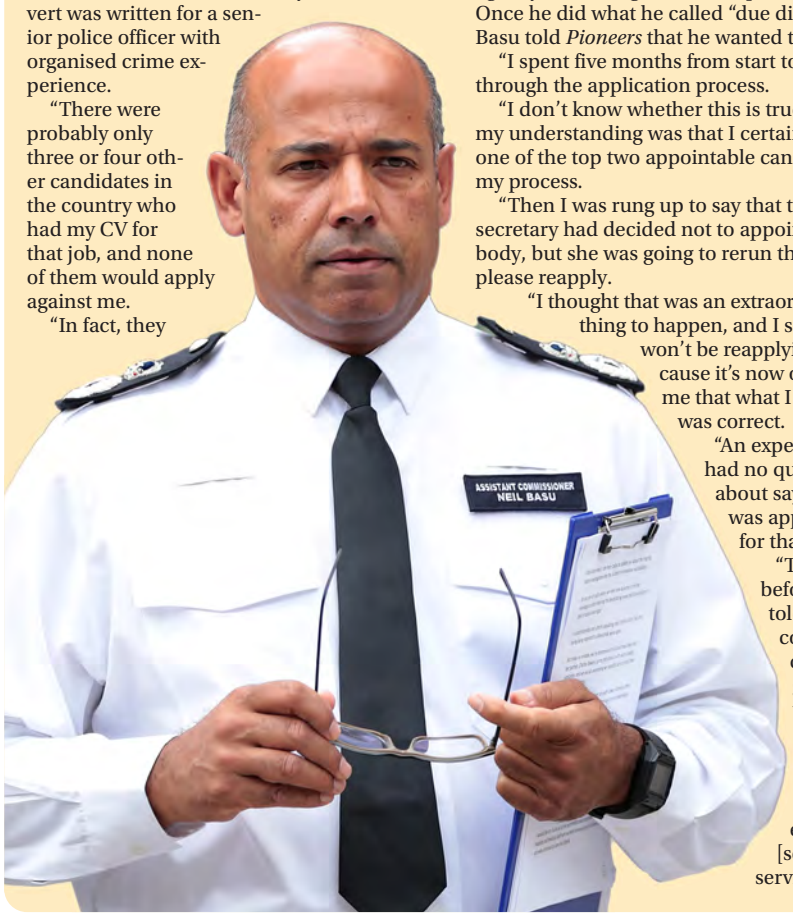
"There was no need for the Home Office, in response to my complaint, to effectively issue a statement saying, we have an open and transparent process running, I don't know what you're complaining about.

"Whether it was an open and transparent process in which you then stopped and then started running another one, because they didn't like what that process did, by law, they're entitled to do that.

"They don't have to run an open and transparent process, because a minister can just appoint who they want.

"But this country should have something very clear to say about a law that allows ministers to do that.

"In positions in which for instance, if you're a director general of an intelligence agency, or the director general of the law enforcement agency, where one of your prime jobs might be to investigate the prime minister, then you shouldn't be in a position where you appoint that person."



TRAILBLAZER: Poppy Jaman

POPPY JAMAN

> Education was not a priority, particularly for girls, so I really struggled

Breaking barriers

Jaman on her work on mental health

WE have spent the day with Poppy Jaman as she shows us around her home city of Portsmouth.

She is excited and memories come flooding back of her childhood and adult life in a city where in 2021 people of colour numbered just 2.9 per cent of the population.

Consider what it must have been in 1981 – almost two generations ago. Because the government did not collect data on ethnicity until a decade later, we can only guess how small it must have been.

By questioning her about her upbringing, we learn that it is seminal – Jaman's childhood defined who she became, her legacy and the reason why she is a pioneer.

The reason for the family settling in a place where the majority was white is interesting and tells of our island's story.

"Granddad was recruited as part

of the East India Company and ended up in Portsmouth docks after being in the merchant navy for 20 years.

"I think it was about mid 1960s that he ended up in Portsmouth, dad joined him when he was about 12 or 13 years old.

"So, granddad's generation were recruited to work in the dockyards to work on the ships.

"I've got documents of granddad's papers from his service in the merchant navy, so I guess we were an economic migrant family.

"When you look at Liverpool, Portsmouth, the London Docklands, there's a concentration of Bengalis in all of those areas, partly because of our roots in the merchant navy and East India Company."

Her grandfather's generation was the one which sacrificed the most to provide for their families, she said.

"They gave up family, they were away from home, they were in a cold country, which they're not used to.

"Many of them didn't like being here, but they were here because they were providing for family back home."

Jaman's father, she explained, was not interested in education.

But he saw it as a duty to make sure his siblings were schooled properly by sending money back to Bangladesh so his brothers and sisters could thrive.

While he was growing up in Britain, Jaman's father lived with his uncles above a restaurant.

Soon he would return to Bangladesh to get married with Jaman being their first child.

She would come to the UK when she was about 18 months old to an extended family living in rooms on top of the business.

Her mother did not take to Britain, and it was only thanks to white neighbours that she eventually settled. The idea was never to remain in the UK, said Jaman.

"Like most of my friends of my generation that are Bangladeshi, or Pakistani or Indian, the migrant recognise the suitcase living on top of the cupboard.

"It was a visual symbol there that we were just working here.

"Mum and dad would often talk about going back home, so we were raised to be able to fit in when we go back home.

"My experience wasn't that we were raised to be here for ever more, my parents resisted assimilation.

"My parents were so proud of being Bengali, and so that would resonate that I don't think there was ever a conscious decision that this was home."

One of Jaman's main childhood memories growing up was that the boys, including an uncle with whom she was similar in age, were allowed to play out, but she was not.

By her own admission, she struggled with the lack of gender equality at home.

At school Jaman said she was "incredibly ambitious", knowing from an early age that she wanted to go to university, leave home and be an engineer. This was a departure from her family's experience.

"My family hadn't come from an academic background, they came from a village community who had incredible skills.

"But education wasn't a priority for them, particularly for girls, so I really struggled."

> My family hadn't come from an academic background

On the plus side, some of her teachers encouraged her to pursue her dreams and nominated her to become head girl.

"I loved it, and it was a lot of fun, but at the same time, it was really difficult because as head girl, there were expectations to go and do after-school meetings and I wasn't allowed out after school.

"So, straddling this really weird world where, on the one hand, I guess my personality, leadership skills, were emerging and being nurtured by some teachers.

"And then, on the other hand, there was 'you need to tone down your personality, you're probably not going to go to university, you're probably going to get married quite young.'

"It was this constant juxtaposition between two worlds."

More than that, Jaman's experiences at school varied depending on the teacher and the subject.

"There were some weird curveballs as well," she said.

"I remember my PE teacher asking me to step out of a school brochure photograph because I wasn't wearing a piece skirt, I had leggings on, and I can't remember the words that she said.

"It was something along the lines of that doesn't fit with the school image, and I remember thinking, okay right so it was subliminal messages that you don't quite fit.

"So, it was complicated growing up in the 1980s."

Outside school, Jaman and her family experienced blatant racism.

They had moved out of the flat into their first house, and that night neighbours threw a brick through their window with a note attached which said, "Go home P***".

Her father and uncles were at work, so it was left to a 12-year-old Jaman to call the police and explain what had happened.

"I remember feeling really quite afraid of what was gonna happen over the next few weeks," Jaman recalled.

"And I remember documentaries at the time of police not protecting Asian families, so it was all a pretty intense period of time.

"The racism continued for some time from a couple of neighbours, and it was our direct next-door neighbour who then stood up against the other neighbours.

"He went and had words, and then it stopped – the looks didn't stop.

"You knew that you weren't liked by certain people on the street simply because of the way that you looked.

"But the aggression and the direct racism stopped after the neighbour next door decided to take it upon himself because the police weren't going to do anything about it."

Racism at that time was common for south Asian families. It was not just their homes which were targeted but their businesses as well, and the family restaurant was no exception.

It was a time when south Asians kept their heads down, taking attacks in their stride without complaint.

Indeed, Jaman was surprised when she saw a box of single windowpanes in the restaurant.

"I remember saying to dad, 'why have you got boxes of this glass here?'

Poppy Jaman after receiving the honorary doctorate from University of Gloucestershire in 2018

"And he just said, 'Oh, every time they chuck a rock through the window, I just changed the pane of glass.'

"He said it so matter of factly, like it was 'oh, yeah, I just change the toilet roll when it runs out.

"And I didn't know whether I admired him for adapting. Years later, I quizzed him about it, and he said that they had a big window in the shop front of the takeaway.

"Because it was so expensive to replace it, he decided to get windows with lots of little panes in it, which meant that he could just change the single glass panes himself."

This generation of south Asians was patriarchal, with clear boundaries.

Elders frowned upon boy-girl relationships outside a marriage context – everywhere she went, Jaman needed a chaperone.

But that did not stop Jaman who revealed her brother would cover for her and she would cover for him when either wanted to have a secret relationship.

"As we were growing up not having the chance to choose your life partner was a pretty big narrative within the community that I grew up in, and certainly, in my family.

"Pretty much all of my cousins and friends who were Bengali, male and female, were in secret relationships.

"We just didn't tell our parents anything because we just knew that it wasn't going to go anywhere.

"It was really very common in my generation of younger people to run away from home, to elope with their lover as a way of ensuring that they married who they wanted.

"Every few months, we'd hear of such and such's daughter's run away with someone.

"Interestingly, it was always the daughters that was always talked about which again, I have a problem with, gender discrimination was always with the girl."

Jaman was expected to get married in Bangladesh to a man of her parents' choosing.

Poppy Jaman with her mother at the Khadi outfit showcase as part of India Day in the London Fashion Week 2023; *(below)* at the mental health awareness week organised by British Asian Trust in May 2023

By this time, she had finished her GCSEs, but she knew that she would never be able to take A levels.

"What I rebelled against was my lack of opportunity to go to university and travel.

"The relationship that I had that caused another spin off in my life, was in order to get away from home so that I could continue to study,

"I didn't know how to get my freedom and opportunity to become an engineer because my parents weren't going to let me go to university.

"So, when I met a guy, I thought, well, actually, if I leave this situation with him, then surely, I can go off and do whatever I wanted to do which was very naive."

Like many parents, Jaman's mother and father thought the rebelliousness was the result of bad parenting.

This led to stricter controls, and by the time she was 16, they broke the news that she would go to Bangladesh to get married.

Poppy Jaman at the *Ramniklal Solanki Pioneers* event in 2021

Jaman told *Pioneers* that she ran away from home with just 10 pounds in her pocket.

She lasted a week, and a fortnight later she was in Bangladesh being forced to marry.

That trauma would lead to problems.

"I had developed mental health difficulties in my late teens, early twenties, it was diagnosed as postnatal depression, that was the first encounter with the whole mental health agenda.

"What I learnt as a 20-year-old with a baby, in a marriage that I didn't want to be in, in a council house with 60 quid a week in my pocket was that how much the odds are stacked up against you for recovery.

"Particularly if talking therapy isn't culturally nuanced, which it wasn't.

"Particularly if the medical profession doesn't understand or seek to understand or have the time to understand your wider context, it's really hard.

"I had an amazing health visitor, who was of Chinese ethnicity, she immediately got the sort of thing that I was struggling with, and she had a different frame of reference.

"What I learned in that journey was that we needed more mental health education, and we needed to normalise this thing called mental illness because it was really common, I saw it everywhere.

"What I didn't realise when I was going through it was that was going to become my career."

At 23, she went to work for the National Health Service as a community development officer, and her manager nominated her for a leadership programme for people of colour.

Like many ethnic minorities, she admitted she had imposter syndrome but went on the course, nevertheless.

"There were about four of us, Asian women, talking about the oppression that we experienced as women, by our community and by the men in our community.

"That blew my mind. I was like, 'Okay, I thought we were fighting racism out there, we were fighting oppression and colonialism and all that, but we weren't.

"It was almost like I had the covers lifted from my sight.

"The module finished, we went back home, and for a month, I was a wreck, and I was angry, I was livid, and I saw discrimination everywhere."

We must remember that Jaman left school with just her secondary school GCSE qualifications. In later years, she worked for the Department for Health – as it was known then – to work on a programme called Delivering Race Equality.

Her boss recognised her talent, and he persuaded Jaman to undertake a master's in business administration or MBA.

Although she was frightened, it gave her confidence, and in a way, permission to become her own person.

By 2009, Jaman founded and became the first chief executive of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), a small government project.

It was a non-profit organisation which taught workers to spot mental health challenges faced by their colleagues and how to get help.

What she did was remarkable – she took a Department of Health Programme and turned it into an organisation which is profitable, and the profits are ploughed back into the institution.

Under a decade later, in 2017 the *FT* would recognise her organisation as one of the fastest growing small medium enterprises in Europe.

"One of the first private companies to take on Mental Health First Aid, was Unilever.

"Linklaters was one of the early law firms; Mighty, the big infrastructure company; Ernst and Young, EY is another one.

"So, they were going coming to us and going we want mental health training, and what is this Mental Health First Aid, and can we try it out?

"Because very tragically, some of them had experienced suicide.

"Suicide, it happens and when it happens, those people are workers as well.

"They're parents, they're family members, but they also have jobs, and quite often workplaces can be part of the mental health struggles that those people experience, or they can be part of the healing."

At this time the financial crisis, when the banks were in trouble had struck, and every week, said Jarman, people in the City took their lives. As more and more deaths happened, the FTSE companies realised how invaluable her idea was.

"To the credit of some of the leaders in the City of London, they were like enough, we don't want to brush this thing under the carpet anymore, we want to do something about it, but nobody was up for doing it on their own.

"I was running Mental Health First Aid at the time, and we had already started delivering training into some of the big companies.

"Three of those leaders came and said we've been talking about this, one of them was a lawyer, one of them is an accountant, and another one came from the banking sector.

"They were like, we really want to do something about this, and that's how the City Mental Health Alliance, which is now MindForward Alliance, was born."

What is remarkable about Jaman's work is that the bosses of FTSE 100 companies are breaking taboos.

They are sharing their own personal stories of being vulnerable caused by work-related stress.

Suddenly, it has become OK to admit you need help, without anyone thinking you are weak. But there remains a big problem among south Asian communities where mental illness has one word – *paagal* – madness.

Jaman contends that only by "opening up" would south Asians be able to confront challenges they have been ignoring and hiding because of community stigma and shame.

She urged all communities to face their struggles head on, especially because the pandemic had made things worse.

So, what of the future, what is her vision?

"My vision is world domination with mental health, it's really simple, ask anybody in my team, they'll tell you that.

"I want to leave a legacy where every workplace in the world has normalised mental health, just like they have health and safety, so it becomes absolutely bog-standard expectation that when you come to work, you will go away saying that that job is good, it enhances your life, rather than it harms your life.

"It's not just about money, it's not just about income, it's actually challenging you, it's bringing new communities, fostering a sense of belonging, it's giving you an identity.

"That's the legacy that I want to leave with my organisation."

Perhaps "world domination with mental health" is not such a fanciful idea. Today, she influences big FTSE companies to change the way they tackle mental health challenges among their workforces.

Poppy Jaman with the British Asian Trust pannel to discuss the contribution of British Asians to the UK in November 2023

"Right now, we are in seven countries, UK, Hong Kong, Australia, Singapore, New Zealand, Portugal and India. We've got nearly 100 multinationals that are in our membership community, collectively we employ something like four or five million people.

"Collectively, we are in about 190 countries through that, so in terms of reach and depth, we've got the start of a framework.

"In terms of the level of the discussion, Singapore is at government level, we're developing relationships with organisations like the World Health Organization and others.

"We've got so much more work to do, and I feel like we've just laid the foundations over the past 10 years."

We need to lead with compassion, not empathy

THE boss of a leading mental health organisation is urging businesses executives to lead with compassion rather than being simply empathetic.

Research by those involved in the mental health field suggests that people living in the most deprived 10 per cent of areas in the UK are more than twice as likely to die from suicide than those living in the wealthiest 10 per cent.

Now Poppy Jaman, CEO of MindForward Alliance, told *Pioneers* that the cost-of-living crisis and the aftereffects of the pandemic have made things worse.

In a three-week period, she revealed that she had 10 conversations about suicide, three of her colleagues had attended funerals where that was the cause, and one person had taken their own life.

Jaman put that down to "the accumulative exacerbated impact of the pandemic".

"I would say that I lead with compassion, and not empathy, and the difference between empathy and compassion, for me is action.

"When we're empathetic with somebody, I put myself in somebody else's shoes, and I hold their pain, whatever it is, they're going through.

"But compassion is about what you're going to do about that, and that is crucial.

"Because I think leadership is a responsibility, it doesn't matter about the size of the organisation that you're leading, it is a responsibility."

Last year, the global consultants, Deloitte, revealed that poor mental health costs the UK economy £56 billion a year.

It said, "New Deloitte survey found that 28 per cent of employees have either left in 2021 or are planning to leave their jobs in 2022, with 61 per cent citing poor mental health as the reason they are leaving."

The boss of the global not-for-profit organisation, which is transforming workplace culture, said to combat the problem, leaders needed integrity and to speak about their own experiences.

"What am I doing and saying when nobody is watching?

"That really matters to me, that's why I decided in 2016 to come out with my own lived experience story.

"By this time, I'm leading Mental Health First Aid, and it's a growing UK brand.

"We've got big corporates, big brands taking on Mental Health First Aid, and it's a huge success.

"Then somebody in my executive team said to me, I've never hidden that I live with mental health difficulties, or I've experienced mental health difficulties, but I never openly talked about it and that bit of my life because of shame and stigma."

What workforces, through their leaders, must understand is that it is acceptable to be vulnerable. That was made clear, she said, when she shared a platform with banker, António Mota de Sousa Horta-Osório.

"It was an invitation-only event, and we invited senior people from across the banking sector.

"I did my story, and he did his story, we shared the same platform, it was a pretty intimate room, the knock on effect of that, in terms of other city leaders then taking on the mental health mantle was incredible.

"They could see a senior person who'd gone public, but who's also leading one of our major institutions.

"The vulnerability demonstrates to people that actually it's okay to talk about mental health, it's absolutely possible to lead, succeed and mental illness is not synonymous with weakness."

AZEEM RAFIQ

> Cricket initially was a great way to integrate into society

ULTIMATE FIGHT: Azeem Rafiq

It's not banter

Rafiq's fight for justice and change

ON November 16, 2021, a Muslim professional cricketer changed his sport forever.

It would take immense bravery, an enormous personal toll, and it would ultimately force him to leave the UK.

Azeem Rafiq testified before the sport select committee and revealed his experiences of racism to MPs during his time at Yorkshire County Cricket Club.

Few will forget his harrowing account and how he broke down as he remembered the club's treatment of him when he revealed his first son was stillborn.

But we need to go back 15 months before, when Rafiq became emotional during an interview with *Wisden*, the publication considered to be the cricket bible.

While he outlined some of his experiences to *Wisden*, it was the following month and his interview with the journalist, George Dobell,

Azeem Rafiq in a Yorkshire limited overs team shirt; *(below)* at GG2 Awards

which seemed to act as a catalyst for action.

His former club set up an independent panel to investigate and dismiss his claims that Yorkshire was institutionally racist.

The P-word, concluded the panel, was "banter" between two friends.

Perhaps one of the most shocking revelations during his first select committee hearing was how, as a Muslim, he was forced to fit in.

"I was pinned down, this was my local club Barnsley, and it was in the back of the car," Rafiq told *Pioneers*.

"I didn't say anything at the time, but I raised this stuff with Yorkshire, I spoke about this in an interview in November 2020.

"One of the witnesses got in touch, texted me I was there, I was put through this process by police, by an ECB, I had written proof, and it took me pushing before it got to a point where they had to accept that this took place.

"Everything was tried, the press tried to undermine all of it [my claims], and I've got clear messages to prove that it happened.

"This is the most difficult bit, at the time, as a young 15-year-old, I'm just thinking, if I'd gone and told my dad, I'd have never played cricket again.

"That's the one thing people say to you, oh, why didn't you say at the time? Or, you know, why didn't you raise it then?

"This bloke is an ex-professional cricketer, so where do you go?

"I wouldn't have played cricket again, dad wouldn't have let me."

The point was that the court of public opinion did believe what happened to Rafiq.

In November 2020, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) appointed Cindy Butts, an experienced and respected regulator, to lead a review into racism, misogyny and classism in the sport.

After a two-and-a-half-year review of the sport, the Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket (ICEC) concluded that "structural and institutional racism continue to exist across the game".

Rafiq was born in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1991, and he grew up in Barnsley in south Yorkshire where he attended Holgate School.

His coming to Britain is a story worth telling.

Azeem Rafiq's father, Muhammed, brought his family to England from Pakistan in July 2001, after kidnappers murdered his real estate and construction business partner. Until that point, 10-year-old Rafiq had had a privileged upbringing in a multi-generational home.

The love of cricket came from his grandfather, and he remembered halcyon days, playing the game, while his mother tried to get him to study.

That soon changed when his father claimed asylum and the family moved to Barnsley in south Yorkshire – a relatively non-multicultural part of the county.

A few months later two planes slammed into the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, and like many south Asians and Muslims, the Rafiqs felt the brunt of racism.

"My dad had a long beard, that was the first experience of not feeling welcome and being different.

"He was called bin Laden, terrorist, told to f-off back in the street.

"Dad doesn't know, he wasn't fluent [in English], we don't have a clue.

"A lot of people still don't really know why the P-word is derogatory and racist, which I find quite staggering, really.

"There was like a flick of a switch [when 9-11 happened], and I think it happened again around Brexit.

"Brexit was the point at which you felt it's given everyone a free rein to just say whatever they want, and quite frankly, be racist and have no accountability."

Barnsley, Rafiq told *Pioneers*, had few non-white people, and he had heard stories of the town's first mosque being destroyed by arsonists.

Young Azeem revealed that he faced racism, more so during secondary school, but cricket proved to be a great leveller.

"Cricket initially was a great way to integrate into society for me because my cricket club was next to my school.

"I was excelling from pretty early on, and I'd say, the same lads I played cricket with at the club and in my school year.

"So, initially it was actually quite a nice way to have an identity or integration."

That lack of community had a toll on his family.

"When you're young, you just adapt naturally and subconsciously to the environment that you're in, you find a way, I guess.

"But now I think back and the thing that upsets me is how hard my mum and dad must have found it.

"Throughout people say 'you're one of us, you're one of us' until you say something that's not appreciated. But I guess isolation was part of my upbringing.

"I went to school, played cricket, went to school, played cricket, but the toughest thing I think which is not spoken about is how as south Asians we live two different lives.

"Life is different at home and outside, so these are challenges, and as you grow up, you educate yourself and you actually realise how isolated you have been, and how much trauma you've experienced.

"You learn more about mental health and how much trauma has built up through the isolation that you never knew was present."

To survive in Britain, Rafiq's father sold his assets in Pakistan – a sacrifice the former cricketer knew nothing about until recently.

"What he's been able to do just incredible, he sacrificed his life for us.

"I only found this out recently, the whole racism stuff, because he told me, everyone thought I was living my dream.

"Mum and dad found it really difficult, and they decided that we were gonna go back and they were going to tell the kids the next morning.

"That morning, my letter came through that I'd been picked for the Yorkshire under-12s, so we ended up staying.

"So, I feel sensitive, I guess it's guilt, but also a sense of how much he sacrificed, in his forties, he sacrificed his whole life, his own career, for us, to give us a better opportunity.

"It was just incredible what he did, how he was able to do it."

Rafiq told *Pioneers* that in 2003, a local MP said that Yorkshire cricket was institutionally racist, and in response the county recruited south Asian players into its academy.

So, he saw others from his community playing the sport day in, day out.

But we should remember this was a time of casual racism when a south Asian corner shop was referred to being the P*** shop.

But Rafiq focused on cricket rather than fighting racism, and he did very well.

He captained the winning academy side in Abu Dhabi, which included the future England team captain, Joe Root and several national players.

Captaincy, Rafiq said, felt natural because he had already led the England under-15s, and other teams which had Jos Buttler and Ben Stokes in the squad.

In 2012 Rafiq became Yorkshire's youngest ever captain and their first south Asian origin.

He was unbeaten as skipper during the six T20 matches, for which he stood in for the injured Andrew Gale.

But soon, by his own admission, Rafiq lost his way.

"I'd been very confident, I never drank, didn't go out, I was very strong my religion, and then I saw a fellow player from the same community as me, and he was doing all of that.

"I don't even think it was consciously, I just fell into that trap, and I started drinking, going out, and I started getting opportunities, and I got to captain.

"I was like, this is brilliant, I did really well performing, got picked for England Lions, but I knew this wasn't me, and I started to really struggle.

"Even then, when I was out drinking, my teammates are coming up to me and saying don't talk to him, he's a P, he's not a sheikh, he's not got any oil.

"So, even when I was trying to fit in, I felt worthless, and now I think it's staggering that I didn't say anything at the time, because I was being called the P-word from people to work at the ground, people in the local bars and stuff.

"It wasn't just my teammates who were doing it so openly, it was everyone doing it."

His experiences took a toll on his mental health, and Rafiq revealed to *Pioneers* that since 2013, he has been taking anti-depressants off and on.

He described it as the "darkest period" where he contemplated taking his life.

Eventually, in 2017, Rafiq did complain about the racism and bullying that he faced at Yorkshire Cricket Club.

"I first reported it as bullying initially because, as a person of colour, to start actually believing you're being treated differently because of your race and religion is draining, it's traumatising.

"Your lens changes, you look at everything from that lens, it's hard not to, because we've got so much trauma that we've lived through that it starts to really all build up and come up all at once.

"When I reported it, seven other people reported it, all seven others were white, and only one person faced a backlash."

An inquiry found that its former captain was the "victim of racial harassment and bullying".

While they upheld seven of the 43 allegations the panel concluded that the club was not institutionally racist.

The inquiry was headed by a south Asian, and it had several people of colour on the panel.

Their conclusion that the P-word was banter did not sit well with fair-minded Britons.

Then then health secretary, Sajid Javid tweeted, "'Paki' is not banter." The minister called for heads "to roll at Yorkshire".

Rafiq recalled that intervention as a life-changing moment.

"That report got leaked, and when that hit the press that Monday morning my life and the world just changed.

"It was condemnation from every angle of society, but Sajid Javid's tweet, because he was a health minister at the time was huge, and it just took it to another level.

"Then you had Boris' [Johnson, prime minister] office commenting, and then initially I think DCMS [digital culture media and sport] select committee was going to call these guys to explain, none of them went.

"Then 43 sponsors left for Yorkshire in a day, everything just happened so quickly, and then I was asked to go to DCMS, and I was like, 'Absolutely, I'll go.'"

His evidence to the select committee fed into the Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket (ICEC) inquiry.

His words had an avalanche of ramifications.

It led to many resignations at the club.

Sponsors pulled out. Yorkshire became the focus of further investigations by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB).

The club released a statement saying the former player was "the victim of inappropriate behaviour", and it offered "profound apologies" when some of the findings of the so-called independent report came out.

It said that due to legal constraints it could not release the finding of the report in full.

Rafiq criticised the statement, and in an interview said Yorkshire had downplayed racism by labelling it as "inappropriate behaviour".

Almost immediately after his testimony to MPs, it emerged that Rafiq had made anti-Semitic remarks on social media when he was younger.

The player apologised immediately and unequivocally said what he did was wrong. But it is a stick with which his critics beat him.

"The Jewish community were brilliant, and I'm very thankful to them," he told the *Asian Media Group*. "They invited me in, and I got the honour of being a candlelighter at the Anne Frank annual anniversary lunch.

"I met a Holocaust survivor, which is the first time I knew anything about the Holocaust.

Azeem Rafiq *(second from left)* receives the 'Yakinori Change Maker Award' during the Sporting Equals Awards in October 2023; *(facing page)* the cover of Azeem Rafiq's new book

"I then went on another journey, and I wanted to go to Auschwitz, which I got the opportunity to do.

"It's so tough, so confronting, but I got to spend time with people who were strangers at start of the week, and arguably, some of them have become friends for life. I now try and encourage people to visit Auschwitz.

"I've got good relationships with quite a few people within the Jewish community.

"But for people that don't want to forgive me, that's fine.

"For Jewish people that don't want to forgive me, that's fine because it's not for me to decide when my apology's accepted.

"I know I've hurt people, so it's for them to decide when they accept that, and that's fine.

"I will continue on my journey, and hopefully what I can do is bring two communities together that are very similar in a lot of ways and face similar challenges."

> Let's not mask this as a Yorkshire only problem and the Yorkshire old guard

In 2021, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) approached Professor, the Lord Patel of Bradford to investigate claims of racism at Headingly. The peer agreed and began his inquiry in November that year.

On the day he was appointed interim chair, Patel told a news conference what he had already put in place.

They included:

- settling the employment tribunal with Rafiq, without a non-disclosure agreement (NDA), as the club previously requested.
- setting up an independent whistleblowing hotline for other victims of discrimination to come forward.
- commissioning a review of practices and procedures on diversity and inclusion at the club.
- sharing the full report into Rafiq's allegations with parties who had a "legal interest", including Rafiq's lawyers, the ECB and MPs.

In December 2021, weeks after Patel's tenure began, 16 people left Yorkshire.

They included the director of cricket Martyn Moxon, head coach Andrew Gale and all members of the coaching staff.

Parts of the media and influential former players attacked Patel, which did not surprise Rafiq.

"I look at the way Lord Patel's been treated by the game, not just the old guard at Yorkshire, but by the game," he said when he spoke to *Eastern Eye*.

"And that just shows to me that actually everything's lip service.

"I didn't know Lord Patel before his coming in.

"But what an honourable man, he's done some of the biggest real-life things, in his career and in the House of Lords for 20 years and he got treated that way, and by the game.

"Let's not mask this as a Yorkshire only problem and the Yorkshire old guard."

The problem, he told *Pioneers*, is that "a large part of that press, and I'm sure I'll be attacked for this, is they could not, and would not take that a brown man was leading over them, or a brown kid had been heard".

"It's just sad that the old guard we are not with him because they have missed such an opportunity.

"The plans that he had with the credibility that he carries globally, it would have turned the club into a financial, inclusive powerhouse and absolute powerhouse in sport.

"The old guard couldn't get past the colour of his skin.

"Like me, I don't think he got supported anywhere near enough by the ECB.

"I think he's done the hardest thing, and

probably given the biggest sacrifice for cricket, and if they don't capitalise on this, they will regret it.

"It proves the point, if a lord gets treated like that what are the chance the rest of us got?"

But by being a pioneer, putting his head above the parapet when others have said nothing, Rafiq has paid a personal price.

Part of the sport will not accept that the game is institutionally, structurally and systemically racist.

And despite the evidence and conclusion of an independent inquiry, a stubbornly small, but influential, section will never accept that Yorkshire did anything wrong.

This minority has driven Rafiq out of his UK home – the last straw when someone defecated in his garden.

More than a year since that incident, the police have failed to catch the culprit, so the former cricketer has moved his family to the safety of Dubai.

Even so, Rafiq loves the UK and knows that most white Britons support him.

"I got the most amazing, most amazing professional support anyone can ever watch from who I got it from Doughty Street Chambers [law firm], I got that support from a PR firm in London.

"But my true, true support are from two journalists, George Dobell and James Butler.

"These people put their careers, everything on the line, and they suffered.

"Some of their colleagues, and I'll put it in the nicest way possible, have taken the side of the racists and have done it in a very malicious manner.

"They've shown what institutional racism looks like, and George said that at the second DCMS select committee hearing.

"It's the powers to be, standing shoulder to shoulder and using all the tactics in the world, and saying that we're having none of it.

"George saved my life because he has carried so much with me, that I don't know as a human being how I would have coped."

It's Not Banter, It's Racism: What Cricket's Dirty Secret Reveals About Our Society – by Azeem Rafiq and George Dobell was launched in June 2024.

'It would be naive of me to think that there is not a chance of this happening again'

THE scandal of racism in cricket is still happening today, according to Azeem Rafiq.

The cricketer exposed an institutional, systemic and structural problem when he gave evidence to MPs in 2020.

He has revealed to *Pioneers* that he is contacted on a "weekly basis" by someone upset by the racism which exists in cricket, proving his sport remains institutionally racist.

"I know of stuff happening right now which is not dissimilar to mine," he said. "It's hard for people to come and speak, I get it on a weekly basis.

"I get it across society on a weekly basis, this stuff is still happening, it would be naive of me to think that there is not a chance of this happening, very naive.

"It is still around the P-word.

"I got a phone call from someone about a director of cricket in a county cricket club mocking Ramadan by saying, 'Oh, yeah, I'm fasting too' and putting his beer up.

"The CEO's aware of it, everyone's aware of it, but they don't act till someone puts them under pressure on their pockets or in the media."

Despite the wealth of evidence, some still refuse to believe what happened to Rafiq.

But he revealed to *Pioneers* that he has documents under subject access requests which back his claims against the club.

"I've never put any of the documents into the public domain, and I could have done it on day one.

"If I do that, none of these people will ever work again.

"It is horrific, it's vile, I have got email conversations of people who I thought were on my side, I've got all of this, so it makes me laugh when people say, 'We've just taken one person's word as gospel.'"

Rafiq said his sole focus is to change the sport rather than focus on individuals.

"They are as much a victim of the institution as I am.

"I've tried to stay away from individuals throughout this, that independent investigation from Yorkshire was so scared of institutional racism that they pushed it onto individuals," he said.

Most of these individuals came into the environment as 14, 15-year-olds and are being shown this as a way to behave and it's fine.

"They've been groomed, some of them are horrific, some of the things that they've tried to do to me.

"I have tried to make sure that it doesn't damage the cause in a negative way, and I just want things to get better, and I don't feel that putting these documents out is going to make things better, and that's why I haven't done this yet.

"But I'm human, and there have been days where I've been like, 'What am I doing? Why am I allowing these people to continuously cause harm to me, my family and people that support me?'"

The former cricketer is also urging the media and politicians to temper their language of divisiveness.

"The media's got a big role to play in this, until you live the life on the other side of the press, you don't actually realise the impact it has on you.

"The words, the headlines, the reports, each and every one of them words, and language has an effect on our workplace, in our schools on our streets.

"The language used by a home secretary, that type of language plays out in action on our streets, in our schools, in our workplaces.

"That's the hardest thing to take, but it can be changed, it can be effective, but through some politicians and some of our leaders and some of the press, there seems to be we've got to a place in our society which is very divisive, it's the language of hate."

Rafiq said that the new leadership has an opportunity to "get things right" but he warned that people were watching the club.

"I would just say to them, do not think that you can go back to your old selves, because there's the future of our kids, it's and the future of our people, and we're no longer going to sit on the side and allow our kids to go through what I did.

"Until it fully comes from the heart, and they go away from the superficial changes into proper change, get away from PR initiatives into learning and educating, having a clear accountability factor, I don't think it'll take another 20 years for the person to speak out."

But Rafiq warned that it is the so called south Asian community leaders who are doing the most damage to the cause of race relations.

They are being used to shore up and allow institutional racism to flourish.

"A lot of the people that supported me were middle-aged white men, a lot of the people that supported Yorkshire to cover it up, that were part of the discrediting campaign, and are still putting a lot of effort to whatever they think they're trying to do to me, are coming from people from our communities.

"I don't believe that institutional racism takes place without people of colour, because the system goes to a select few that will happily look after themselves, and play the system for their benefit, and then the punch down.

"There's a generation of our leaders that have failed us, and I want the younger generation, to ask questions, because it's the future of our kids.

"I would love our younger generation to be more informed, don't just accept it, and let them damage us."

Azeem Rafiq at a candle lighting ceremony to mark Holocaust Memorial Day and the 75th publication of Anne Franks' diary in January 2022

BUILDING CARE: Dr Chaand Nagpaul

DR CHAAND NAGPAUL

The good doctor

A calm voice holding power to account

THERE is a story which Dr Chaand Nagpaul CBE tells and it sums him up to a tee.

It is 1993, and the young doctor is attending a British Medical Association family doctors' conference.

Nagpaul had been a GP for a couple of years, and it was his first time at such an event.

"I put myself down to speak to a motion, and I saw the top table and people speaking who were highly eloquent, who had great command of the English language," he recalled.

"When it was my turn to speak, I bottled out.

"I was too scared. I didn't feel I'd be able to.

"So, in fact, that was my first experience of feeling in awe, and felt, this isn't something I could do."

That fear, that uncertainty would have floored most people.

But Nagpaul did what has become his trademark, because he knew at a young age – seven – that he had to succeed in whatever he did.

"As I have done my whole life, in preparing, I went to the conference next year, having actually researched the areas I was going to speak on to an encyclopaedia level.

"This time I knew what I was gonna say, and in fact, I remember having given that speech I got a rousing reception and people coming to me afterwards saying, where did you get that information from?

"For me, it was like a research project that I had to be my best."

That speech gave Nagpaul not only confidence that he was equal to the task but also media coverage.

Soon he would be elected to the BMA GPs' committee, a body which was in

1996 hideously white. That was something this pioneer was used to.

Chaand Nagpaul's parents emigrated from Kenya.

His grandparents had left India and settled, like tens of thousands, in east Africa.

Many south Asians set up lucrative business, and they lived luxurious lives with big houses and employing Africans as their servants.

Nagpaul's father, Lalit, was an entrepreneur who ran a successful photography business and garage.

But by 1968 that comparatively wealthy lifestyle would be over.

His parents realised that east African heads of state would soon expel south Asians, and his father made his way to Britain.

Like thousands of other south Asians, Nagpaul's father would work to save money to bring his wife and two children to Clapham in London.

"It was quite strange being in this compact, first floor of a terraced house with two rooms, a far cry from the open space that we were living in, in Kenya.

"I remember having to be careful about even being able to play because the sound of our footsteps as children were disturbing the landlord underneath, so I didn't feel free.

"It was completely different in Kenya where you just had space.

"If anyone walked past you, they'd almost look the other way, it just didn't feel friendly.

"And I remember thinking to myself, why has my father brought me here?"

Things would get worse because they were not only the only non-white family on their street, but when he went to school, Nagpaul was the only person of colour.

Growing up in a Britain which was hostile to non-white immigrants, the young Chaand Nagpaul faced racism and P*** bashing.

"There was the National Front that was a right-wing organisation that really wanted Britain to be white.

"For me, as a child seeing all of that, with skinheads who would openly make it a badge of honour to attack people of ethnic minorities in the street, I felt afraid.

"It was rife. I remember when I used to come back from school, if I saw skinheads across the street, I would take another route because I was afraid of being attacked.

"I remember one occasion where I was being chased by two skinheads and I remember just getting to the home, opening the door quickly with my key and banging it shut, and then panting with relief, that somehow, I had escaped, being attacked.

"That was the reality of the day."

Where he once was top of his class and destined for a top career, his primary teachers told him he was not bright enough to enter grammar school.

But his parents left Clapham for a bigger house and the more multi-cultural area of Finchley in north London.

Nagpaul recalled how he gave his father an ultimatum – he wanted to go to a school where more of the pupils looked like him.

"We did apply to the grammar school, and I did get into a state grammar school.

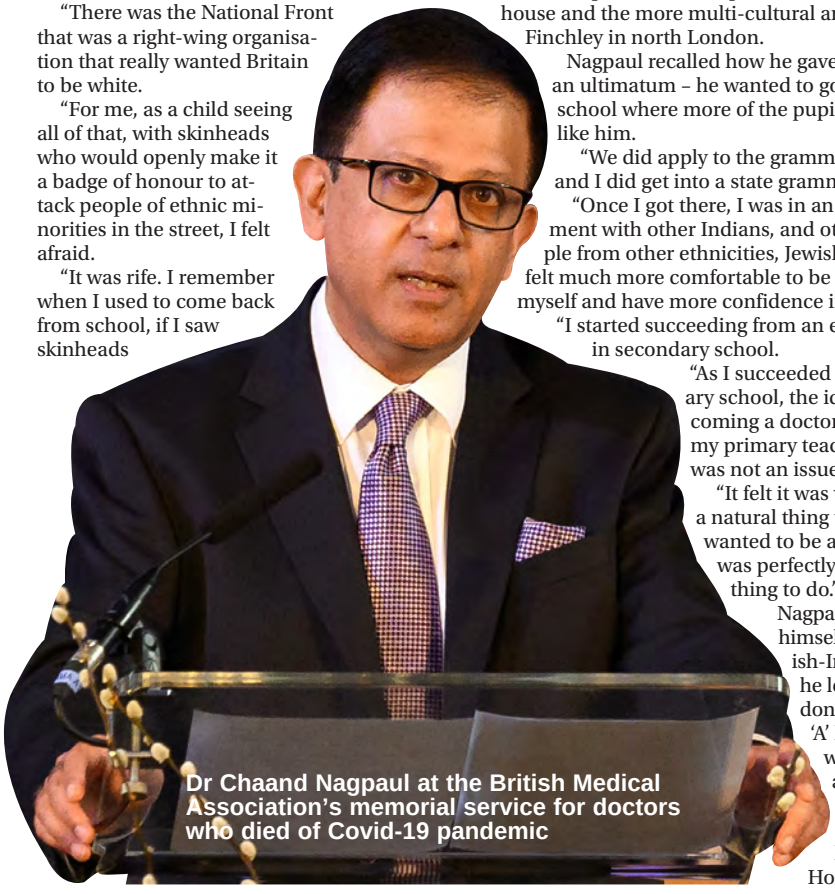
"Once I got there, I was in an environment with other Indians, and other people from other ethnicities, Jewish friends, I felt much more comfortable to be able to be myself and have more confidence in myself.

"I started succeeding from an early stage in secondary school.

"As I succeeded in secondary school, the idea of becoming a doctor, and what my primary teacher said, was not an issue.

"It felt it was very much a natural thing that if I wanted to be a doctor, it was perfectly the right thing to do."

Nagpaul sees himself as a British-Indian, but he loves London, and after 'A' levels he won a place at the prestigious St Bartholomew's Hospital.



Dr Chaand Nagpaul at the British Medical Association's memorial service for doctors who died of Covid-19 pandemic

Dr Chaand Nagpaul with Tony Fairweather, the founder-curator of Windrush Collection, in June 2023; *(above)* with his sister when their family came to the UK in 1968

Barts, as it is known, is steeped in British history. It was founded in the 12th century and remained open during both world wars.

Armed with a medical degree, Nagpaul decided he wanted to be a family doctor or GP.

Yet, nine times he faced rejection without interview.

"I went to my GP tutor, and I said this is what's happened.

"He said, you know, it's your name, that's the problem.

"It hadn't even dawned on me that there could be a selection process that disadvantaged me because of my name."

Once again, Nagpaul's inability to accept defeat led him to do something few others in his position would do.

Unlike some, he did not have money or influence to get onto a GPs' training course.

"What I did for the 10th application is I went to Charing Cross Hospital for the training scheme.

"I knocked on the door of the consultant who was the postgraduate tutor and responsible for shortlisting and I said you don't know me.

"I'm Dr. Chaand Nagpal. I'm a junior doctor, but I want to be GP and train in your medical school.

"I want you to know who I am. Here's my CV.

"Please open the envelope, read it, because I really want to be a GP.

"And I was shortlisted, and I'm convinced that it was because he saw the face behind the name.

"But even then, when I was shortlisted, there were 180 applicants for two posts."

Nagpaul did what he always did.

He researched his subject so deeply that the panel had no option but to admit him.

What few will know is that at the time same as applying for UK medical schools, Nagpaul sat the America entrance exam to be a doctor.

"A lot of Asians were telling their kids, well, America is the place to go in the midst of what was discrimination, that was a land of opportunity.

"I went to America, after I qualified as a doctor, and I met some family friends who were doctors there.

"I met another student who I knew had gone to study in the States, and she said to me, do I need to go to the doctor to have a follow up appointment for a bladder scan?

"I said, why have you asked me that, and she said because they're going to charge me for that, and I don't know whether I really need to go.

"And I thought to myself, I don't want to be part of a system where money changes hands between patient and doctor, where people who are excluded from having access to health care.

"That one visit was enough for me to say, I want to be part of the National Health Service, and that has been a conviction in me from the beginning, and I still to this day believe that those values are vitally important in my role as a doctor."

From there the rest is history because this young man would quietly change the way the British Medical Association (BMA) would treat doctors and patients of colour.

He joined his current practice 33 years ago, which he now runs with his wife, Meena.

It is more than three times its original size and served almost 17,000 patients of which 75 per cent are of colour, mostly south Asian.

Dr Chaand Nagpaul at Doctors In Distress Charity's planting ceremony remembering the doctors lost from suicide, in May 2023; *(below)* at the NHS ConfedExpo in June 2023

Like the modern practice, it takes a holistic approach to medicine with pharmacists, physiotherapists, a mental health worker and advance nurse practitioners.

It is clear Nagpaul brings a different perspective from most people.

In July 2017, doctors voted Nagpaul as their first person of colour to lead the British Medical Association in its 191-year history.

This was a three-year term.

Members voted him in for a further 12 months, not once but twice, and he could only serve as chair of council for a maximum five years.

He led the doctors' union during one of its darkest times - the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.

Nagpaul highlighted that more doctors and nurses of colour were used on the frontline, often without the proper equipment, afraid of being disciplined and dying disproportionately.

It backed what *Eastern Eye* exposed.

Sources have told *Pioneers*, without his leadership, it would have been unlikely that this important health disparity would have highlighted to the extent it was.

"When you come across the first 10 doctors who died all coming from an ethnic minority background, that flies in the face of any sort of statistical variation.

"It is a statistic that it demands action, not just to protect doctors and healthcare workers from Covid, as it was then, but also the underlying factors that would lead to such a statistic, so it could not be ignored.

> More doctors and nurses of colour were dying

"I remember it was mid-April, and I just called it out.

"I said the government had to act – it needs to have an independent inquiry.

"It should never have come to this, that it needed a pandemic with its disparities to wake up the government and wake up people about these gross inequalities."

But his humility shines through – he never wanted to be BMA chair, it just happened.

In fact, when he was first elected to join the BMA GPs committee in 1996, Nagpaul felt it was a privilege.

"There were very few people of colour in that room," he recalled, "so, I felt both a sense of achievement, but also a sense of needing to be part of a group that I wasn't a natural because these were people who were highly articulate, and they were medical politicians."

Nagpaul broke glass ceilings becoming the first person of colour to be voted onto the executive of the GPs committee, followed by be-

coming its chair. He said he did this by preparing for his brief as no one had before him.

The former BMA chair said the organisation has changed and it recognised more than it did people of colour.

Nagpaul agreed that he had to learn the invaluable lesson of the politics of his profession.

"I've never thought of myself as a politician, I don't belong to political party, but what I do believe in are principles and values and issues.

"As the years passed, I had to acquire certain skills of how to conduct myself.

"Throughout my medical political career, I have had to have regular conversations with heads of government, with ministers, heads of NHS England, policymakers.

"You have to understand and learn the political constraints of how to achieve change. But what I can say with a clear conscience is that I've always been true to myself, I have never gone to a secretary of state, and taken any approach other than what I believe to be the case.

"I've been able to challenge head on, both in person or in the media.

"I believe that some changes have occurred, and I believe that I've had the respect of people I've met.

"I'm not a career politician, but I've operated within the political framework."

The most difficult part of being BMA chair, he said, was being away from his practice, and he missed being a frontline GP.

He has treated some of his patients for more than 30 years.

As always, this level of responsibility is not enough, and this family doctor is involved in representing GPs in influencing the integrated care board to deliver positive change.

Nagpaul, though, has never forgotten that he is here today because of others, and he paid tribute to those Asian doctors from overseas who mentored and helped him as he was training to be a doctor.

"I learned in my council chair the scale of suffering of ethnic minority doctors.

"Being the first ethnic minority council chair, suddenly for many ethnic minority doctors, they felt they had an avenue to communicate.

"So, even to the current day, I get communications from doctors, who say I know you're no longer chair of the BMA, but I need to tell you about what's going on in my hospital trust.

"My inbox was flooded from the day that I became BMA council chair from doctors telling me just what their experiences were and wanting me to help, which was one of the real drivers for why I did what I did as the BMA chair."

Don't 'short change' doctors by holding back people of colour

THE former chair of the doctors' union, Chaand Nagpaul, has urged his BMA colleagues not to undo the work he and others have done to create a more equal and diverse association.

"When I became chair of the BMA council, I was very clear that the point of holding such position is not to hold a position, but it's there to make a difference.

"I do believe those changes are happening for the British Medical Association to have the backs of all doctors and certainly have the backs of doctors of ethnic minorities who experience such disadvantage even today.

"Early on, I held a race equality summit, because I could see there's a problem here.

"I engaged with large numbers of ethnic minorities, representative groups and medical groups to work in allegiance with them.

"I made representations to government, I tried to raise the profile and its importance.

"Ultimately, this isn't just about a moral right, this is about bringing out the best of a talented workforce who are being dumbed down.

"I believe the NHS is being short-changed by not allowing people to be their best.

"I think it has a service impact because I know how talented these doctors are and I see how they've been disadvantaged.

"It's tragic that here we are, that if you are a doctor of an ethnic minority background, you are twice as likely to be bullied and harassed in the workplace; you're twice as likely to be referred to the regulator or twice as likely to be complained about within internal processes; you're less likely to progress in your career in terms of postgraduate examinations; you're less likely to be shortlisted, if you want to get a job as a consultant, less likely to be offered that position.

"That should not be happening."

Only one in five doctors who is of colour is a member of the BMA compared to 40 per cent ethnic minorities who work in the profession.

How does he hope that will change now he is no longer at the helm?

"I can sincerely hope that the trajectory I've set should continue.

"One of the things that I established, and I'm very proud of doing is, we set up a national race equality forum, where every BMA doctor of ethnic minority or medical students, is automatically a member.

"We have regional fora that have now engaged doctors of ethnic minorities in a way that the BMA never did before.

"There was no such forum, there was no such regional structures, and we've seen doctors now feel a sense that the BMA has a palpable reality for them, and they have a voice.

"I'm looking forward to this forum evolving to the point where we can provide local advocacy, mentorship, support.

"A doctor comes from another country and will know that the BMA has regional arrangements so that they can feel supported, learn about the cultural challenges, have someone to talk to.

"I've certainly done what I can to put in place an infrastructure.

"Another bit of work that I've commissioned, with the support of my council, is for the BMA to evaluate its own service for ethnic minority doctors to make sure that it is culturally competent, that it's providing our ethnic minority and doctors come from overseas the best possible service they can.

"Now I hope, and I believe that this trajectory will continue.

"But I will still be a BMA member, and if they're not going to do that, of course, I'll make a noise about that, but I believe that I've set in place a trajectory."

Nagpaul's legacy is one of social justice and equality.

"I do believe that if you believe in equality, and I created an initiative called 'equality matters' in the BMA because it does matter for people.

"It matters for patients and for the health service.

"You can't discriminate in terms of equality, you can't say, 'I want equality only for ethnic minorities.'

"I believe that all doctors and patients need to be treated with equality, and in that regard, I'm very committed that the BMA needs to ensure that it supports its members.

"That each of them feels equally looked after, each of them feels that they have equal advocacy.

"Each of them feels that their trade union will step in and do the best for them at times of need, because the NHS is a highly challenging environment."

Dr Chaand Nagpaul with BMA colleagues after chairing his last meeting of the council in May 2022

> My father was very positive, and he was always keen to go that further mile to make it all happen

Legacy of faith and hard work

Inspiring story of a multicultural hero

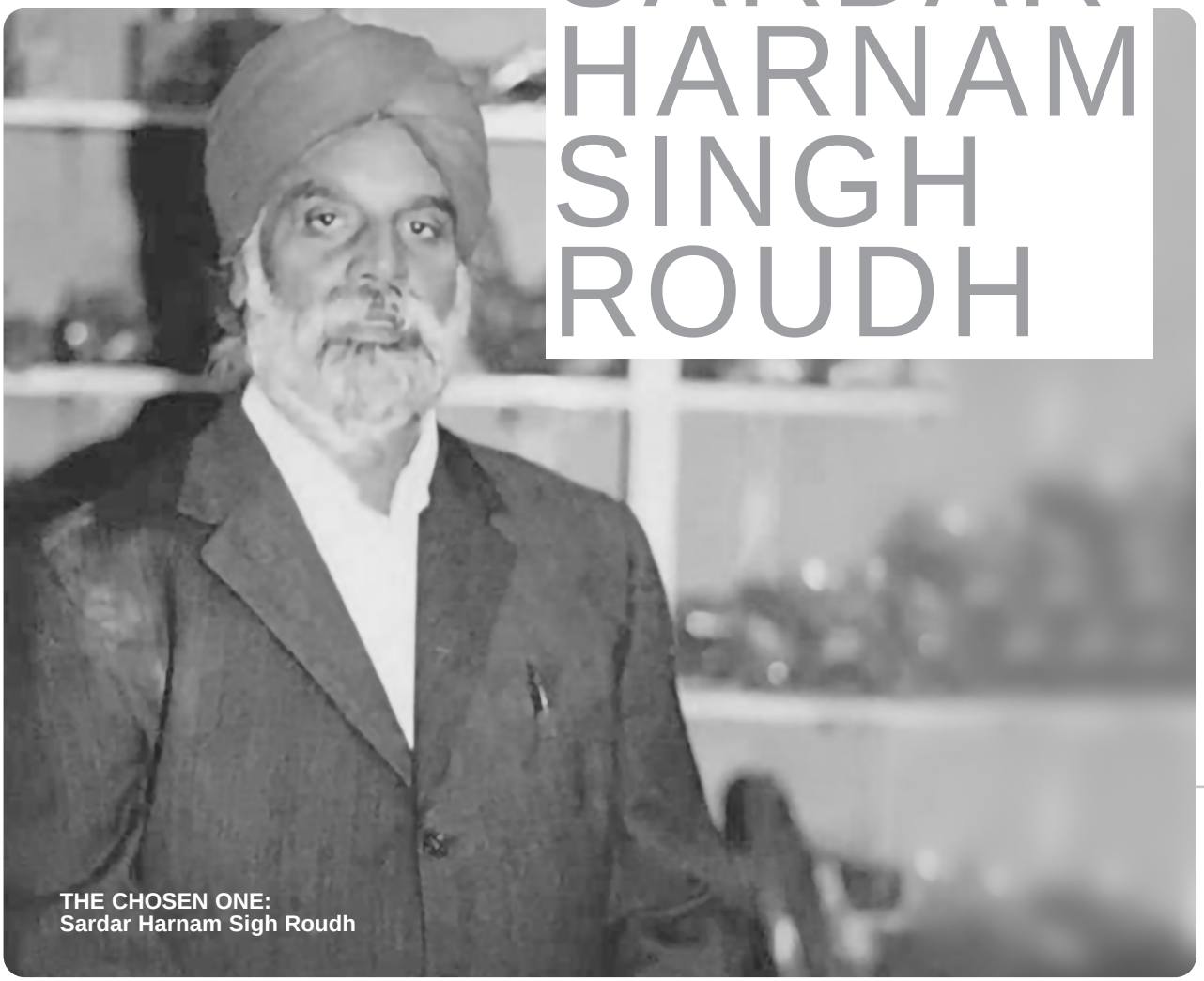
FOR a man who arrived in the UK with just three pounds in his pocket and knowing a few words of English, Sardar Harnam Singh Roudh left a legacy of which many can only dream.

By the time he passed in 1988, this humble businessman was known by the hundreds who lined Southampton's streets as "the father of the city's multicultural communities".

From being an unassuming door-to-door salesman, Harnam Singh would use his entrepreneurial talent to build the city's first international emporium.

One son would be known as the first "turbaned pub landlord", two others would become family doctors, while the third generation of grandchildren would go to university in pursuit of professional careers and fulfil the dream of contributing and changing the face of modern Britain.

SARDAR HARNAM SINGH ROUDH



THE CHOSEN ONE:
Sardar Harnam Sigh Roudh

Sardar Harnam Sigh Roudh with his wife, late Mrs Jaswant Kaur, and family

"My father was a person who was very inspirational, he was a person who was very positive, his attitude to life was very positive," said Malkeat Singh.

You could say that Malkeat followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a community engagement officer, and in doing so helps keep race relations alive.

While Harnam Singh did it singlehandedly for his adopted home, Southampton City Council employs his son.

"A lot of that came from him believing in his faith, the principles and values of his faith were embedded in him.

"So, he was very positive, and he was always keen to go that further mile to make it all happen."

Harnam Singh was born in Multan, now a city in Pakistan's Punjab region in 1923 at a time India was one country.

Like thousands of Sikhs, he and his family had to flee their home once India won independence and was divided into three parts in 1947.

"During the partition, obviously, all sorts of cruelty and genocide was going on," explained Dr Amrik Singh, his son.

"Our family moved from Multan to Patiala, a city in south-eastern Punjab on the Indian side.

"We all know the genocide and the atrocities that happened were immense and very daunting. The whole sort of move from Pakistan to India was a challenge and so unsettling for the family.

"But they managed to move in safely, without any atrocities or harm to them, with very few possessions at the time."

His father rarely talked about the dangers they faced, so the family learnt what really happened from relatives.

"It was my grandmother (Jaswant Kaur)," remembered Rani Swali, Harnam Singh's eldest granddaughter and an interpreter.

"We used to watch all dramas on television, and then she would sit through them, and you'd think, why are you getting emotional granny? And she said, 'Well, this is what happened to us.'"

"She would say, 'we didn't have rucksacks and we didn't have trolley bags, we just had bedsheets, and we just wrapped things up in there and just carried them with our two children.

"'She said, 'We just made our way, walking, and on the way what we saw was bloodshed, screaming, shouting, and we were actually terrified whether we would make it out of here.'

"She said, 'Women weren't spared, young women, raped. They killed men. Everybody was just being slaughtered at that time,' and she said it was a horrendous and terrifying experience that anyone could live through."

Her grandfather's family did not stay too long in the Indian side of Punjab. Very soon they left for the capital, Delhi, to join other relatives and Sikhs who had planted roots.

Like most able to work, Harnam Singh became a door-to-door salesman, buying and selling items people needed.

By 1950, Harnam Singh was married, and in 1951 they had a son, Dr Amrik Singh who was their third son and by this time, the extended family had a big decision to make.

"I don't think it was by choice," recalled the GP. "The partition played a very big role, and rebuilding life was so important.

"That transition from Pakistan to Patiala, and then Palatia to Delhi, we lost everything except for our own personal lives, and we felt very blessed to be alive.

"It was then time for our grandfather and our parents and my uncles to rethink as to how we rebuild our lives and how do we make a sustainable future for our children?

"A discussion was taken between my father, my uncles and my grandparents as to how best we might be able to do that.

"Their understanding was that a lot of people, in similar situations, were doing the same, going into a different country, trying to rebuild life, rebuild a stable future."

So, in 1951, the extended family decided that this 28-year-old would go to England, like many before him.

Harnam Singh arrived in Tilbury Docks with just a holdall before, relatively quickly, moving to Southampton, where other Sikhs had started to settle.

What we now know is that these, mainly men on their own, would find any job going, spend as little as possible to make sure they sent money back home to India. The men, often half a dozen at a time in one house, would take it in shifts to work, eat and sleep.

Harnam Singh picked up where he left off in India, as a door-to-door salesman.

"At that time, the appearance of a turban wearing Sikh was very rare in this part of the world," explained his son, Malkeat Singh.

"So, there were challenges and barriers, which included seeking employment, shelter and livelihood, and there was also a lot of discrimination and racism in those days".

Harnam Singh's talent for business soon came to the fore.

He realised that the growing south Asian, African and Caribbean communities were going to London to shop for their spices and condiments, because they could not buy them locally.

So, he opened the first Indian and West Indian "continental store" in the city's Derby Road in 1961, a decade after he arrived.

By that time, he had brought his immediate family over as well as many relatives.

"We were confronted by the Ku Klux Klan, who threatened to come down to the shop and have a confrontation with our family," remembered Malkeat Singh.

"But our father, my uncles, and the local community, stood their ground, and the confrontation did not materialise.

"We were and still are a very close-knit family, supporting one another and that was one of the core principles of our father's way of life.

"That solidarity within the immediate family, helping one another caring for one another, was so instrumental in making us build that sustainable and stable lifestyle."

That sharing and caring approach was not just limited to immediate family members.

"He was always there for people, he's always a father figure for a better word, to everyone that came to him for help," said grandson Harbaksh Singh, a chartered accountant.

"I know of friends, especially people I've worked with, who've mentioned my grandfather.

"A Muslim friend told me about how my grandfather came to his assistance. He was sent here to get married, and when he arrived here, the father of his fiancée changed his mind, which meant he had nowhere to go.

"My grandfather had a word with his father-in-law to be, and he gave him the assurance that they were looking for, and the wedding went ahead."

Word of this pioneer's benevolent approach soon spread, and those in authority soon realised Harnam Singh's ability as a community leader.

But the businessman went further than many realised.

"Alongside having a business, my father had some properties as well, and when new people came, he would offer them somewhere to live," recalled son, Malkeat Singh.

"He would provide food in the shop on a credit basis, and when the individuals had enough money, they could pay him.

"His way of thinking was about giving, sharing, making a difference, so people could improve their quality of life.

"It was important for him to always support people.

"Quite often my father would close the shop and go with people to attend meetings such as housing appointments or benefit appointments, or to take them to a doctor's appointment, because language was a huge barrier."

> His way of thinking was about giving, sharing, making a difference

But when it came to business, he always seemed to know what to do and when to do it, especially spotting gaps in the market, such as corner shops being open all hours.

"It just happened naturally," said Malkeat.

"If you reflect now, when we talk about 24/7 shops opening, that was something that we developed around that time.

"Wherever we saw gaps, we developed them. Sunday afternoon shops were closed because that was the way the country did its business then.

"So, we opened on Sunday, and we brought about a new day of service.

"It was only because of the hard work that this was possible. My dad's belief was always about working hard and making it all count.

Harnam Singh also proactively supported the building of the first gurdwara (Sikh temple) in Clovelly Road in Southampton, together with other senior community members at the time.

Even then, there was a twist in the tale.

"What you got to remember is when the community would gather together, it wasn't just a group of Sikhs," said grandson Harbaksh Singh.

"It included people from other faiths as well because they had no place of worship that they could attend, whether they be Hindus and Muslims, they would come and sit with us, and share that time with fellow Sikhs.

"My grandfather recognised that we were all in the same boat thousands of miles away from home.

"Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims. We had to depend on ourselves and support each other. We needed to live together, work together and share things together."

It is clear that this pioneer's faith was important to him, as he did not wish to let his parents or relatives down.

"He was obviously a baptised and practising Sikh with a turban and a beard," explained his son, Dr Amrik Singh.

"The worrying concern was that he would lose that identity and that feeling was very, very strong, not just amongst the grandparents, but also the elders in the family as well.

"They were very worried and concerned about that, and the elders advised him about keeping his identity.

"He kept his turban, he kept his beard, not only that, but he also actually brought us up as very devout Sikhs, following the Sikh path.

"Whilst we were growing up those values he retained."

But his father also recognised that while his

Sardar Harnam Singh Roudh with garland flowers in India; *(above)* at the top table in the Star of India restaurant, Southampton

faith was important, he was pragmatic enough to embrace the British way of life.

"My elder brother, Mulkh Singh wanted to open a British pub, although it is a British thing," said son Malkeat Singh.

"He said he wanted to open it up in a kind of a Punjabi way, introduce food, hopefully people bring them together, and I think it was very successful at that time."

That opening of a pub, encouraged by Harnam Singh, was so unexpected but embraced by the city, cementing good race relations.

His family believe this pioneer's legacy is still being felt more than 30 years after his passing.

"If you reflect back over the years, the biggest step that he probably took was to leave his family behind in 1951," said grandson Harbaksh Singh.

"To make that trip by himself, to go to a completely strange country, if he hadn't made that trip, I often wonder where we would be today.

"The single biggest achievement was for him to build up that courage and make that decision that he wanted to change his family's future."

His sister Rani Swali agreed.

"I'm so grateful that my grandmother and my grandfather took the steps they did to bring my father and my uncles and aunties to this land of opportunity for a better future for all of us.

"Because I can't imagine how my life would be if we were still out in India.

"I have seen family members my own age, my own relatives, living the way they do, and the kind of life they have in India.

"Thank God that you did what you did for us."

And another grandchild, lawyer and chief executive of the India Business group which creates opportunities between India and the UK, Amarjit Singh, said his grandfather's legacy was clear and profound.

"My grandfather was a hero, a role model, the ultimate game changer who changed the fate of our family through his actions and efforts.

"He was a hero because of his actions, his values, and his principles which he imparted to his siblings, his children, his grandchildren, and his great grandchildren, to be good, to be honest, hardworking and with integrity."

Harnam Singh never planned what he did, and yet he was a visionary, said his family.

"If you look at Southampton today, Southampton is a very diverse, multicultural, multi-faith city," said his son Malkeat Singh.

"Some of the work he did in those days, bringing people together, to talk, to learn, to understand, and from which we have all benefitted and our communities.

"We have people from all over the world here. We constantly have asylum seekers, refugees escaping from what's happened in their country. But there are networks and platforms that he thought about at that time to support and help those people build some sort of a life.

"Communities were very important to him, as well as his family."

The legacy of Harnam Singh still resonates widely across communities in Southampton.

'My grandfather founded our British-Sikh identity'

THE grandchild of Sardar Harnam Singh Roudh paid tribute to her late grandfather by explaining that not losing his identity was important in 1950s Britain.

Rani Swali, an interpreter, said her grandfather was responsible for making sure his family never forgot their roots.

"My grandfather didn't come here for us to lose our identity," she said. "He embedded that in us, and that is something that we will always keep alive through generations.

"We are what we are, we are Punjabis, and we Punjabi-Sikhs, we have identity of our own. And we stick out from the crowd, and we don't mix into that crowd."

Politicians and far-right groups regularly question whether immigrants, their children and grandchildren are integrated and loyal to Britain. And the idea of identity is so important to Rani.

"I am Punjabi, I'm his granddaughter, and I live in a modern society," she said. "I go to work, but I work in my Punjabi suit."

"Most of my family, and with my grandfather's family, have adopted the English way of life and its traditions.

"But we have still kept our values alive, in our traditions, what our grandparents had taught us."

Rani made the point that it is not an "either-or" choice. It can be both.

"We've taken best of both worlds and put it together. We've taken out the good from the Punjab and from Britain, and we just put it together.

"That's what we are, and that's what you've seen throughout the day.

"Our children, they're British born, but they still have their Punjabi parents, and they still are Punjabi.

"When we were growing up, there wasn't many opportunities for us to learn our own language.

"Today there is an opportunity, and our children have kept their identity with their appearances and with their language and being literate in both English and Punjabi.

"They're correct to have kept the identity alive, because if we keep our language, our mother tongue, alive, we don't lose our identity," Rani said.

The need to keep their Punjabi roots and identity is to remember and honour her grandfather, she said.

"My granddad came to this country with just three pounds in his pocket, and a vision.

"He went from nowhere to somewhere.

"And he went there because of his honest living and service to the community and to his wider family."

History also acknowledges that many of the immigrants coming to the UK did not know whether they were going to settle here.

It was the same with Harnam Singh Roudh.

"At that time becoming a British citizen, it never occurred to him. I think he was just trying to be a husband, a good father, and a brother and a son to the family that he left behind.

"He was just trying to provide for them.

"The family, his grandchildren, children, we're all British-Punjabis.

"We are more British than I think he would ever have been.

"Why was that? I don't think he had time for anything like that. I think, on top of his agenda was making a better life for us all, paving a path for his family, to join him and having a brighter future."

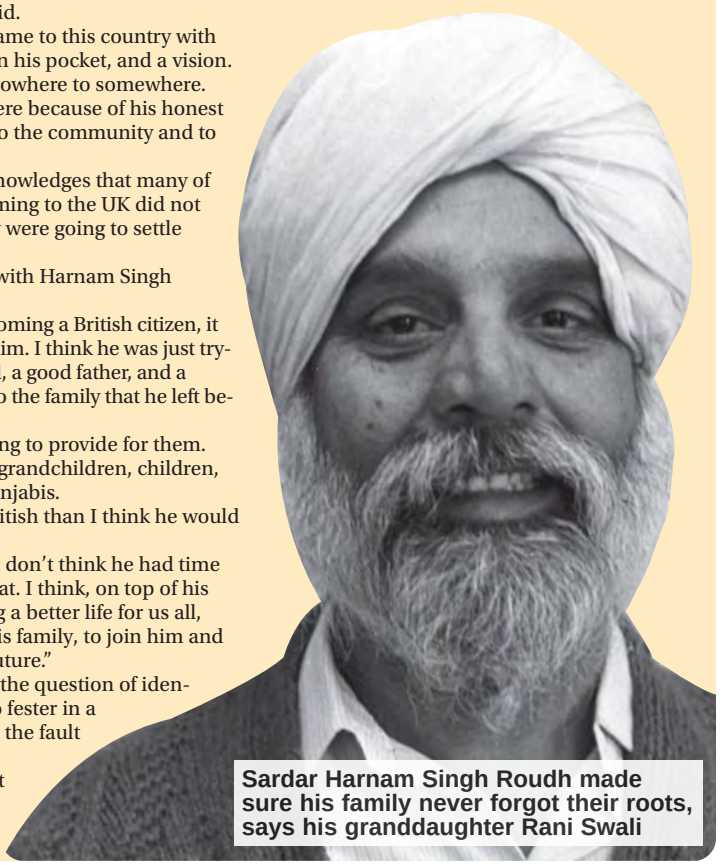
Rani knows that the question of identity will continue to fester in a country built along the fault lines of race.

But that does not worry her.

"My children are strong enough, and my children can hold their own ground," she answered what she would tell her children about their identity.

"They know what they are, they have an identity as well. They are Punjabi Sikhs in Britain, and they are British."

"They don't need me to tell them that. I don't have grandchildren yet. So, when that arises, we will deal with it then."



Sardar Harnam Singh Roudh made sure his family never forgot their roots, says his granddaughter Rani Swali

LORD NAVNIT DHOLAKIA

INFLUENTIAL VOICE:
Lord Navnit Dholakia

> My mother was the one who was in charge of what was going on in the family

Powerful voice in the Lords

Inspiring journey of a Liberal Democrat

WE meet Lord Navnit Dholakia at his London home. It is a Saturday morning in January, and Ann, his wife of 57 years, is, as ever, by his side. Theirs is the story of 1960s Britain. One a south Asian, the other a white Briton, facing the harsh realities of a country emerging the setting of the sun on a period when Britain ruled a vast empire.

"Quite often the N-word was being used towards Ann for going out with me," the peer told the *Ramniklal Solanki Pioneers Project*. "It was very difficult because even good friends used to turn around and say, 'It's not you that we're worried about. The problem is the children who will be born is the thing that worries us.' I said what was wrong with that. They will have to grow up in a society where they will have to fight any obstacles which come their way. But Ann was

also working in hospital at that time as a sister, and the matron of the hospital called her and said she knew that she was going out with me and 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet', and I think that made us stronger, to keep the relationship going, and I think we became very close."

Navnit Dholakia was born in Tanzania in east Africa. His parents had moved from India in search of work. Dholakia's father worked on the railways and rose to become a station master. His earliest memories are of living in a place called Moshi, with Mount Kilimanjaro as the backdrop. It was a place where Indians had settled and built-up local businesses.

"My earliest recollection is of going to school, but the problem was that there were no newspapers, no radio, no television, no electricity," he recalled, "Light was by paraffin lamps, that's how we used to live. We used to sit down in a circle, brothers and sister and used to read and do our homework by this light.

"The only other thing that I can remember is that whenever there was a function, like Diwali, or religious functions, the entire town use to meet at the school. Everyone used to get in a big circle and shook hands. Rather than going to everybody's houses, we used to meet, talk to each other and then come back home."

Dholakia had a wonderful childhood, and he was immensely bright, always coming top of his class. The problem, though, was that because his father was a station master, the family would have to move lock, stock and barrel every few months as his work took him from place to place.

"Mother was the one who was in charge of what was going on in the family," Dholakia told *Pioneers*. "Every time my father got his monthly salary, he would give it to my mother, apart from taking some money for the tobacco. My mother didn't read or write. My recollection is when I'm going to school, my mother would call me and say, 'Can you read me this particular book?' It used to be the *Ramayana* or *Bhagavad Gita* etc., [Hindu texts] I used to read that particular book to her, and everybody thought it was because I had a religious attitude. That wasn't the purpose. The purpose was very simple. I got 10 cents as a token money for reading all the stuff that was in the book."

His parents sent Dholakia and his brothers to India to the Home School and Institute of Science in Bhavnagar in Gujarat to complete their secondary education. They would visit their son every three to four years, said the peer, and would keep up to date with their educational progress through letters to Tanzania. Dholakia remembers that he fell ill with typhoid and was sick for three months.

It was after that his father decided that his son should further his education in the UK. Dholakia worked in a bank and saved up enough money for his fare to England. He took a ship from east Africa to Tilbury Docks via the Suez Canal.

"This was basically a cruise ship, where people went to Africa to look at animals," he said. "There was another Indian with me, not my friend, but I met him on the boat, and we were given the cabin. Both of us were given accommodation right in the bottom hull of the ship itself. It didn't have a window or anything like that, and we were treated differently from rest of the crowd, who was travelling at that time, mainly white people. The two of us were people of colour, and that's how I realised the differential that existed in Africa at that time. White people were at the top, Asian were the middle class, and the black people were the working-class people, servants, in the community in which we lived. The same pattern followed in the ship, until I docked at Tilbury Docks in London."

Once in London, on his way to start his degree at Brighton Technical College, Dholakia, aged 17, went to East Africa House in Marble

Lord Navnit Dholakia *(right)* at the Brighton Centre during the Liberal Democrat Conference in 2003; *(above)* during his younger days

Arch. There a man from Africa asked him to save a seat for him at breakfast.

"He said, 'My name is Julius Nyerere [the man who would later become the president of Tanzania], and I'm here to negotiate independence for Africa.' And we became very good friends. He was a Christian and I received Christmas cards every year from him, and when I went on a delegation or visit to Tanzania, during holidays, from time to time, he would receive me, he would talk to me, and he was a very, very personal good friend. When he died, I was asked to give a eulogy, on his death in Tanzania, and in London as well. Through people like him, I was able to meet Kenneth Kaunda [former president of Zambia], who was a good friend. So, I was able to reach some of the top people, and I was considered as part of a larger family, within which I was always invited."

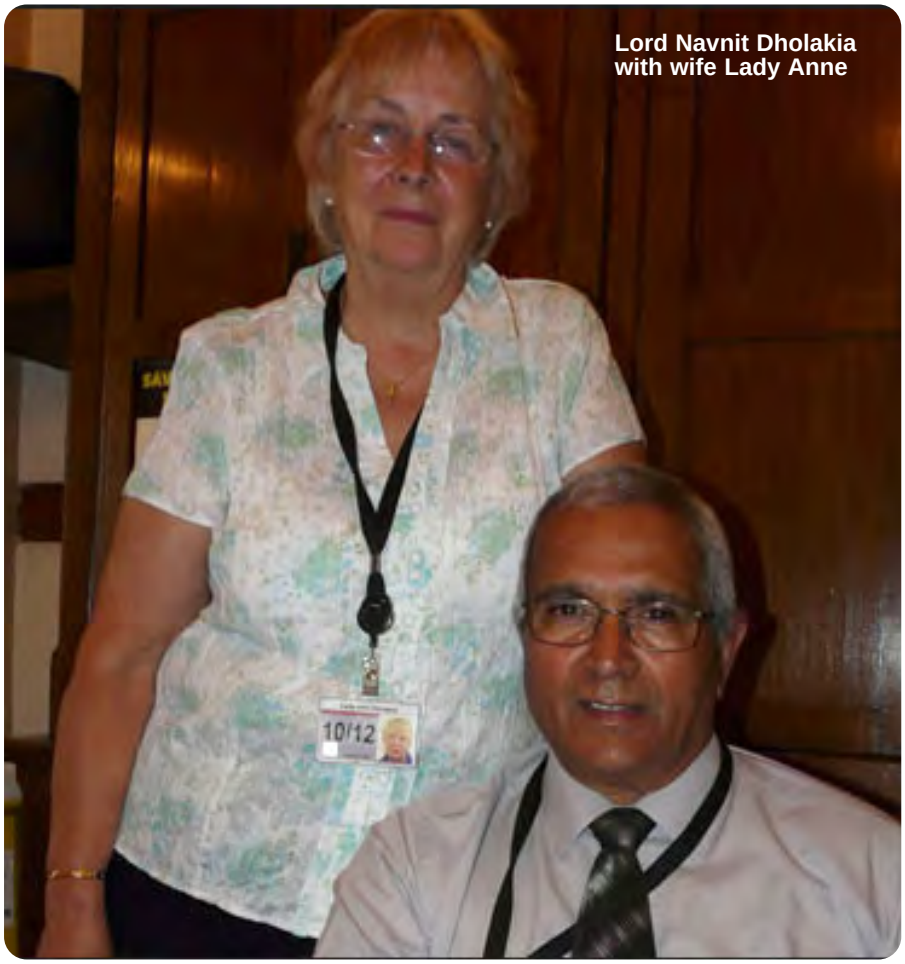
> I will always want to see progress on the issues that affect the community

Throughout this interview, Dholakia recalled names of world leaders who became personal friends, such was his influence. After a few days in London, the young student arrived in Brighton for his studies. One story of note is how he joined the Liberals, at a time when Labour had targeted south Asian, African and Caribbean voters. It began when one of Dholakia's Indian friends invited him to a pub – something he knew nothing about – and he never arrived, leaving him alone.

"He told me to meet him at a place called Montpelier Hotel in its basement," he recalled. "Downstairs there was a bar man in the corner serving the drinks, and there were three or four young people sitting in a corner. I stood in one side of the bar, expecting my friend to turn up, he didn't turn up at all, and I was absolutely horrified because I'd never bought a drink in my life before. But there was sheer luck at that time, which has shaped my career. One of the young men from the three or four people who are sitting in the corner, came around to me and said, 'Excuse me, we are the young Liberals. So, I said, 'What's your problem?' He said, they couldn't get on with their meeting because they couldn't form a quorum. What I'd have to do is pay half a crown to shilling and become a member, so they could get on with their meeting. That is why I became a liberal at that time. I realised they were a different group of young people who were keen to advance politically run meetings, go to the council chambers, and demonstrations."

Since that timely coincidental meeting, the peer has been loyal to his party. It led him to stand for Brighton Council and become the first Liberal councillor at that time, and it was his new friends who canvassed alongside him.

"I never thought with a name like mine, Dholakia, I'd get elected, but this was a name they could remember come the election. When I was fighting the election, I suddenly realised the real problem of racism and the difficulty related to that. In the local newspaper, there were a lot of nasty letters coming through, saying we don't want Asians. In fact, even the newspapers were fairly racist in their approach. I remember one editorial said it's not a bit surprising to see Indians come to this country and fight elections. And in doing so there will be in bribery and corruption being brought into the good governance of our towns and cities. This was picked up by national newspapers as well. But the real problem that I had was that people used to really puncture the car that I was driving at the time. It was a very old car, it cost me only £50 to buy it, but they used to throw acid on my bonnet of the car and put dirty, filthy, stuff through the letterbox regularly. And I said to myself, we've got real problems."



Lord Navnit Dholakia with wife Lady Anne

Faced with virulent racism, Dholakia wanted to give up. But it was the then Labour mayor, Lewis Cohen, who told him in no uncertain terms that he had to fight to win. He was victorious and became a councillor alongside his day job as a medical laboratory technician at the Southlands Hospital.

Cohen took to the young Dholakia and invited him to the mayor's ball, which would ultimately result his meeting and marrying Ann. Even that was fraught with problems when letting his parents know.

"When I said I'm going out with a girl here, they wrote to me and said, 'No, no, we got loads of girls lined up for you in India. You come along and look at them and see which one you want.' This was arranged marriages in those days. So, I said OK, but could I bring the girl that I want to marry, with me, for you to see her? And they said yes. We went along to India, and my mother met Ann for the first time. My mother couldn't read or write, so it was very difficult to communicate, but sign language worked. Within two or three days my mother came to me, and she said you better marry this girl, she is wonderful."

The couple got married in 1967, and they have two daughters.

Dholakia worked hard, and he became the chair of the Liberal Party in his Brighton ward. Soon his work on immigration and racism caught the attention of national party members. In 1969, Dholakia became the secretary of the Liberal Party's Race and Community Relations Panel. Once again someone was there to champion him. It was his local MP who suggested Dholakia applied for a post on the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants.

"He had already spoken to Harold Wilson [then prime minister] about my contribution on race issues. I applied for the particular job, and the archbishop of Canterbury, Dr [Michael] Ramsey, who used to be the chairman of the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants, decided that I should be appointed to the post as the senior officer. So, I joined that committee in 1966."

That campaigning spirit meant that Dholakia would help with the 1976 Race Relations Act, become a member of the Commission for Racial Equality, and then the Police Complaints Authority. In 1994, he was awarded the Order of the British Empire for his services to race relations. Three years later, in 1997, Dholakia was elevated to the House of Lords, where to this day, he continues to lend his voice to the underdog.

"The House of Lords has given me this particular opportunity to be able to take up issues in being able to make the changes that are possible. For example, at the moment I'm involved in trying to raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12. Listen, 10-year-olds do not have the mental capacity to understand crimi-

Lord Navnit Dholakia at the Parliamentarians of Indian Origin meeting in New Delhi on October 26, 2007

nology or crime. Why should we bring them in a situation that you are trying to penalise them for the rest of their lives?"

The peer became the party's deputy president between 2000 and 2004, the first and only Liberal-Democrat of colour to be appointed to this role.

"Between my wife and myself, we covered almost 500 constituencies in this country, regularly just going around to them, talking to them, talking about issues, talking about problems that the country faced, and being able to encourage people to fight local elections. We were very, very successful in that respect. Charles Kennedy and I are credited in trying to bring in 65 members of parliament, which had never happened in the Liberal Democrat party before. I think the success that I had was being an Asian, so when there was an argument about racism [in politics], Charles Kennedy used to say, 'Just look at my party, we are very comfortable with people, even the president of my party is an Asian. I will always want to see progress on the issues that affect the community. That's one of the one of the reasons I was so very much involved in large number of organisations in the country, so that I can talk to them, I can take their inspiration and beliefs forward and bring it into government discussion."

As we came to the end of our conversation, an obvious question with a surprising answer – did Lord Dholakia consider himself a pioneer?

"I consider myself not as a pioneer but as someone who moves in the community, picks up aspirations, picks up the problems and difficulties and reflect that particular problem in a political structure, which I have a little bit of power to be able to say, hey, before you realise it, look at this particular problem, look at this difficulty. I'm not a leader, I never wanted to be a leader. I don't expect anybody to call me leader, but they'll always admit one thing. If I believed certain things to be correct, I never stopped speaking about them, and taking them forward at every opportunity I got."

Second and third generation south Asians are as British as anybody else

PARLIAMENTARIANS of colour who demonise immigrants are doing so for political opportunism, Lord Navnit Dholakia has told the *Pioneers Project*.

The life-long anti-racism campaigner made his comments during a wide-ranging interview about his life.

Last year (October 2023), the then home secretary, Suella Braverman, warned that Britain was facing an "invasion" of illegal migrants.

"When the first four Asians and black people were appointed to parliament, they understood they came from their communities.

"They understood the language and were able to take up this sort of issue and move politically forward.

"But now you've got a second bunch of people coming in to become part of the political structure.

"They have to prove to other people that politically they are as astute in being anti-immigrant or anti-black using expressions which damage particular communities.

"We got a new bunch of people coming in, apart from one or two, many of them will continue this rhetoric in terms of the expressions being used, which is doing a lot of damage to this country to prove themselves, they want to move upwards.

"Even now, some of them have ambitions to move forward by using these expressions, which are doing a lot of damage to the community generally."

The peer said that people of colour born in the UK were loyal to their country of birth.

"My thoughts are very simple, that basically, unless we accept people growing up in this country as they are, born here bred here, have loyalty to this better country.

"They must have equal access to every opportunity that is given to people generally.

"I don't think we should move away from that particular concern, no need to be a right winger, because to show to the political structure, that oh, we are tough there, we want to get these people out, completely changes their particular language.

"For example, Suella Braverman, the way she talked about people coming into this country is not a not an expression of trying to integrate the country, but very much keep them separate from the communities in which we are living, and that will be dangerous."

The peer revealed he was concerned about mixed race children, of which he has two daughters, facing unnecessary discrimination and hostility.

"We tend to treat mixed race children, born in this country, as if they are still the immigrants.

"To many of them the end of the road is the tube journey to Brixton, for example, rather than Jamaica, Barbados, or places like that.

"Same thing applies to Indian communities as well.

"We have produced a generation of people in this country who achieve substantial advancement in education, and yet they're not able to secure the type of jobs which I think is essential if you want to create a multiracial society.

"We've got to accept that if you have mixed race marriages, you have children who are no longer immigrants.

"They're no longer foreigners, and I don't think we need to worry about their identity in the sense of treating them as third-class citizens."

Lord Navnit Dholakia has been a tireless campaigner for racial equality and social justice all his life

© Southall Black Sisters

THE CHANGEMAKERS:
The Southall Black Sisters in 1988

SOUTHALL BLACK SISTERS

> What opened my eyes was seeing young Asian men and women getting involved and fighting back

Empowering generations

How SBS changed Asian feminism

IF we think that women are treated as second-class citizens today, spare a thought for the generations before who fought every inch of the way to give their daughters a fighting chance.

Part of the pantheon of the feminist legacy is the story of the Southall Black Sisters (SBS), a non-profit organisation based in west London.

This is a glimpse into the lives of three remarkable south Asian suffragettes who endured threats from so called community leaders, being disowned by their relatives, and how they overcame the patriarchy and systemic misogyny.

It is a tale of hope over adversity and action over apathy.

"What particularly opened my eyes was seeing young Asian men and women getting involved and fighting back," remembered one of the founders of SBS, Pragna Patel.

It was April 1979, and Patel watched Southall rise up in immutable frustration and anger, hold

peaceful sit-in protests at the local police station, before giving way to an inevitable riot.

And all to fight the right-wing National Front extremists who had decided to hold a provocative, but legal, town hall meeting.

"It just made me realise that being an Asian, didn't mean that you should put up and shut up.

"Being an Asian also meant fighting back, and it really was quite empowering.

"It made me realise that there were other ways of being Asian, we didn't have to be victims, and the way forward, the way to feel proud of our backgrounds, a way to instil self-confidence in ourselves, to empower ourselves was to fight back and to resist.

"That's the lesson I learned, and that's a really important lesson that I still stand by now.

"What stops you from just reacting to everything as victims is you take control, and you fight back.

"You then develop that narrative yourself and on your own terms, so I did that with others.

"It was the first time that I could see that there was another way of being not only just Asian, but also being an Asian woman, these were really important moments."

Patel does not and has not ever condoned violence, indeed her inspiration as a teenager was Mahatma Gandhi.

But that civil disobedience became the hallmark of SBS.

Fast forward to August 2013, and the Home Office was in the depths of its 'hostile environment' campaign to scare those who had entered the country illegally to return to their home country.

One tactic it used was to have vans patrolling UK towns and cities with large immigrant populations. On the vehicle's side was the message, "In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest".

The vans, with their Borders Agency officers, would arrest people they suspected of being in the country illegally.

For SBS, it was a call to action because it felt often vulnerable women became the easiest prey.

Patel's sister, Meena, set up a support group to wait for the vans to arrive.

"One particular day, the women coming in for support," she recalled, "and they say, 'Meena, you do realise they're outside.'

"Then a second one came in, then the third one, and then the bells start ringing, 'Oh, my God, we should be doing something about this.'

"The director's on holiday, so I just quickly mobilised the 15 women that were there, and we went out there.

"I grabbed the megaphone, shut down the office, and we circled around the van.

"I'm not joking, their jaws did drop, because they hadn't realised that a group of minority black women had circled them, and they couldn't drive off.

"I didn't work out what the slogans were going to be or anything, so we were shouting things like 'UKBA, go away'.

"In Hindi, I shouted to everyone if you have a problem with your immigration run, disappear, disappear.

"They [UKBA staff] drove off, two minutes later, I got told they'd barricaded themselves in a shopping mall in the heart of the High Street where there's lot of people.

"By this time, I had 30 women with me who had immigration issues and all sorts.

"Then the community came out, and they kept asking us why are you doing this? What's going on?"

The campaigners captured the incident on film and put it on social media.

The video of the confrontation and protest went viral.

On 22 August, almost a fortnight later, their actions forced the government to abandon its 'hostile vans' campaign after just one month.

So how did SBS begin, and what were some of its biggest achievements?

The Patel sisters shared a familial history of true poverty.

Their father realised that Africa did not want south Asian, even those who were born there for several generations.

He left Kenya and, on his British passport, landed in London.

Like immigrants of that era, he worked three jobs, saved up enough money to bring his wife and children to the UK.

Meena Patel remembers all too well not

© Southall Black Sisters


© PA

Kiranjit Ahluwalia *(second from left)* with Pragna Patel *(second from right)* when she walked free from prison; *(above)* a demonstration to free Kiranjit

knowing whether they would eat, and how she slept in the doorway of her home because she ran away from the childminder.

Pragna Patel's political awakening began early, when she was about 16 or 17 – her parents expected her to get married.

Her resistance campaign lasted a year, and she finally won, leaving home and going to the University of Liverpool.

This was the late 1970s, the era of Thatcherism, racism and futile efforts of the left wing.

During summer breaks from university, Patel admired south Asian feminists on the streets of Southall selling anti-racist and feminist literature.

In the 1960s, the term 'black' encompassed all non-white groups who experienced the same political problems – racism, discrimination at work or not being able to rent, let alone buy property.

Now, more than 40 years later, it is used specifically by African and Caribbean communities.

> These campaigns continue, and they have grown over the years in momentum

Southall Black Sisters was, in Patel's words, "just a campaigning group".

"It was just a number of women that came together following the 1979 uprisings to look not only at racism in society, but also to break with the anti-racist tradition by factoring in women's experiences.

"The male comrades weren't too keen on this because the only struggle was a struggle against race as far as they were concerned.

"But there were a number of Asian women, from Africa, the Caribbean and other backgrounds, who were saying no, women's lives are also shaped by gender inequality, and even the racism that women faced can be gendered.

"Because of the sexism that they faced in the wider anti racist struggle, and the racism that they faced in the wider feminist movement, they said let's set up an autonomous group called Southall Black Sisters."

The activists began to highlight the struggles of Asian and black women – workplace entitlement, the right to unionisation and domestic violence in south Asian homes, for example.

By the time she finished university, the women with whom she had spent summers campaigning had left.

So in 1981, Patel recreated SBS with a more strategic purpose.

"I was so keen on being part of some group, being involved in women's struggles that I resuscitated it and got new members.

"We then got some funding from the then Greater London Council (GLC) to set up the first advocacy centre for black and minority women in west London.

"I picked up on the legacy and politics of the campaigning group and started to build on it and develop the frontline organisation.

"I very much felt that we needed to do more than just campaign around women's rights, we also needed to empower women individually and to provide support that they needed."

Patel had no idea what problems the women would come with.

"It announced feminism, it announced a very radical politics, it announced an anti-racism by the term black.

"It announced a feminist approach by the term sisters, and I wanted to maintain a very, very radical image and an alternative space for women, and signal that this was an alternative feminist space for women.

"What I found was that women started to come to us, particularly Asian women with stories of domestic abuse, forced marriage, or forms of gender-based violence, so we began to respond to that.

"Our services have been very much user led majority of the women who were coming to us with these issues, and related to that were issues of destitution, homelessness, immigration problems and mental trauma and so on."

Around 1985, Hannana Siddiqui joined SBS' management committee.

Like the Patels, Siddiqui had experienced racism, including her family home being set on fire in an arson attack.

She hailed from Middlesbrough, refused to marry her cousin in Pakistan and could not wait to leave home for university at the London School of Economics.

Siddiqui may have been small in stature, but she fought like a "tom boy" to bring down anyone who attempted to bully her.

That pugnacity remains her trademark.

"Secularism, for me, enables people to choose whether or not they believe or not believe it's an enabling process.

"Whereas a faith-based institution or a state may limit people's right to have other forms belief systems.

"Secularism protected our rights, you didn't necessarily then buy into the more conservative interpretations around religion.

"How women had to conform to traditional gender roles, that religion and culture were often used in combination by the community leaders, which tended to be patriarchal, to define how women should lead their lives.

"They will say under our religion, a woman has to behave in a particular way or under our culture, women have to behave in a particular way, which meant that our own sexuality and autonomy and agency were controlled and defined by a strict or conservative interpretation of religion."

Without doubt, the legacy of SBS is that it changed feminism with the south Asian communities.

This was demonstrated by the Kiranjit Ahluwalia case.

After a decade of violent abuse, including burning her face with a hot iron while clutching her hair, in 1989 Ahluwalia poured petrol on his feet and set his husband alight.

She grabbed her son and ran away.

Deepak Ahluwalia died from his injuries 10 days later, and his wife was convicted of his murder.

SBS took up her case, but no one was interested.

Neither her legal team nor the courts wanted to understand the cultural context.

But SBS persevered, and in 1992, the Appeal Court acknowledged new evidence of Ahluwalia's long-term depression caused by years of domestic abuse at the hands of her husband.

It accepted the killing was on the grounds of diminished responsibility and sentenced her to the exact time she had served in prison – three years and four months.

"We were used to dealing with women at the receiving end of abuse, but here was a woman who'd killed as a result of abuse," Pragna Patel told *Pioneers*.

"Trying to provide a feminist response to that was not easy because we had to tie a thread while walking a tightrope.

"That didn't mean what we were saying was a license to kill, but it did mean that the courts and the law needed to understand the context of abuse in which some women are driven to that point. The law was basically weighted against women, and it was constructed around very male norms of behaviour.

Southall Black Sisters changed feminism with the south Asian communities; *(left)* Dr Hannana Siddiqui

© Home Office/PA

The 'Go home' advert of the Home Office

"By taking on that case, challenging the law, challenging community norms and social norms around women, we did not realise at that time how big the case would become, it became enormous.

"It just somehow resonated with people, it resonated with politicians, it resonated with the media, it resonated across all levels of society, black and white.

"In fact, when we took up Kiranjit's case, there were two other white women who were going through similar and we were able to come together as feminists, black and white."

As ever, SBS organised protests outside the Home Office on a weekly basis.

Hundreds of women from all backgrounds took part to challenge the law and the injustice of Ahluwalia's imprisonment.

"Before Kiranjit's case, we were seen as home wreckers, we were destroying families," recalled Siddique.

"In fact, one of the early campaigns I did was to prevent the closure of SBS because the community leaders were saying we were a western-

ised force, that we were undermining the very fabric of Asian culture, so they were strongly lobbying to close this down.

"Now, after Kiranjit's case, we found that there had been a shift in thinking and more and more people within the Asian communities, including men, said domestic violence does exist within our communities, and it's not acceptable.

"In fact, there was a group of Asian men who wrote from prison to sign petitions to free Kiranjit Ahluwalia."

Pragna Patel remembered one story on the day of Ahulwalia's release.

"We were setting up a media interview for her at our office, and she was scared to get into a cab to come to us because she was worried that the cab driver might be Asian and might be hostile towards her.

"We had no choice but to put her in a cab and said let's deal with it if or when it happens.

"She got into a cab, and it was an Asian driver. She got to SBS and then she told me the story, that when she was in the cab, the cab driver turned around and said, 'I know you I've seen you somewhere, you're Kiranjit Ahluwalia, aren't you?'

And he turned around and said, 'I am your brother, I will support you, anytime you want any help come to me.'

"It made me realise the forms of resistance that we've taken by taking on these campaigns when other people say can't be done."

The case had wider ramifications and set a legal precedent.

In 2008, the New Labour government considered changing the partial provocation defence to help women who killed their partners in "fear of serious violence".

The case also allowed SBS to speak with ministers about how men would threaten and coercively control women from south Asia because immigration rules meant they had no recourse to public funds.

"We negotiated a new concession with Mike O'Brien called the domestic violence rule, which enabled women on spousal visas the right to remain in this country," remembered Siddiqui.

"Obviously, we also wanted them to have access to public funds, but at that point, the government even though it was Labour did not want to shift on that point, because they were frightened of opening the floodgates that other migrants may want benefits.

"They didn't want to be seen as entirely soft on immigration.

"That took another 10 years for us to get the destitution and domestic violence concession, but we did eventually get it under the Tories.

"But it's been 30 years since we first raised the issue of immigration law, and no recourse to public funds that trap women economically within violent relationships."

And the fight for SBS continues even today.

"Now, we're trying to extend it to all women who are facing domestic abuse or gender-based violence to have access to public funds, and the government is still resisting us even though they're funding a pilot at the moment.

"But they don't want to give rights to benefits to women who are undocumented, they don't want to give them the right to stay in this country either, or other women who are on non-spousal visas because, again, they're frightened of opening the floodgates.

"Anyway, these campaigns continue, and they have grown over the years in the momentum."

The work these pioneers did mean thou-

sands of south Asian women are better off today than their mothers, grandmothers and great grandmothers. And that is something Meena Patel, who has now left SBS, considers worthwhile.

"I have to say my proudest moment is for those women who I worked with, who were isolated, lonely, who have severe mental health issues, those women who have insecure immigration status who were contemplating or attempting suicide," she said.

"My proudest moment is to be to be able to sit here and say, I've helped them to change their lives, and I've put smiles on some of their faces.

"When I did the support group, I had one woman coming to it.

"When I left, it was 30 to 40 women attending their support groups, and the proudest thing is I haven't segregated along race or religion.

"We all came together as one., and we all discussed.

"I've done several videos with them, one being around dowry, and the Asian women in that group learnt about the dowry systems within other races, which they thought never existed."

Members of SBS during the press release 'Where is the Protection for BME and Migrant Women?' in 2019

The new generation must unite to fight for women's rights

ESTABLISHED immigrant communities are forgetting the struggles they faced and ignoring the pain of newly arrived migrants.

That is a deep concern of the Southall Black Sister pioneers.

"My biggest concern is the way in which we're being divided as communities, and how that's going to have an impact on the future of the newer generation of refugees and asylum seekers, and what that's going to mean," said former SBS co-director, Meena Patel.

"What I'm seeing are the patterns of when we came in the late 1960s and 1970s emerging with them, and the divisions amongst them as well, between who is deserving and who isn't deserving to be in the UK.

"Those who have arrived in this country many years ago, who had the right to remain, and their perspective on migrants being in this country that they have no rights to be here.

"The way in which the state has divided us is a worry for all of us, including poverty and everything that's going on, that goes on at the moment."

Patel is concerned that history is repeating itself.

"Settled migrants are damning of the newer migrants.

"Whether you're African, whether you're Caribbean, Asian, Middle Eastern, they are very damning of the new migrants, and in particularly those who are arriving at back of lorries or on boats.

"Their views are shocking, it's worrying the thoughts that they have.

"What they forget is how they arrived, and I'm not just talking about some of us who arrived in the 70s or so, I'm also talking about migrants who arrived two years ago who are saying exactly the same thing.

"This is what I saw when I did the 'go home vans' campaign.

"My recent discussions about the new arrival of refugees and migrants are people saying these people shouldn't be allowed in these.

"They say Rishi Sunak is right in what they're doing about stopping them and sending them to Rwanda."

Patel's former colleague, Hannana Siddiqui, agreed that demonisation of migrants was definitely a problem.

But feminists also faced other challenges.

"You've got attacks against feminism, or where white feminism doesn't address the needs of black feminism that don't address racial discrimination or inequality.

"There's been attack against human rights as well by the government, there's poverty, Covid has thrown many, many problems but also created recession.

"The Black Lives movement has shown the discrimination that you face from the police and from the state itself, institutionalised racism is being denied.

"This is what over a decade of Conservative government has done.

"But I can see a light and that light is the black and minority feminist movement.

"Even though it is divided, at the end of the day, we still want right, and I think young women can see what the world is out there."

For one of the founders of SBS, Pragna Patel, the divisions are worrying because, she said, it will be the weakest who suffer.

"It is the atomisation that's created by identity politics, by state policies coming together, is profoundly regressive.

"It will impact the most powerless, those who don't have a voice, those who don't have the resources.

"The very people that I have supported over these decades are the people that will suffer, minorities within minorities, women, homosexual sexual minorities, the poor, the elderly, the disabled, these are the people that suffered.

"We have to find ways of talking to each other, listening to each other and coming together on a platform of resistance.

"My worry is that instead of that we are moving further and further away from unity, from collective struggles and understanding that we are strong when we come together."

Pragna Patel wants communities to fight together, not against each other

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