

Name: Tariq Raja
Date of Birth: 1988
Place of Birth: Islamabad, Pakistan
Date of Interview: 25th January, 2018
Interviewed by: Moss Bancroft [and Roger Kitchen]
Duration: 00:16:55

00:00:02

All right. It's the 25th January, 2018. This is Moss Bancroft and I'm interviewing Tariq. Could you give us your full name please?

Tariq Raja.

Thank you. And could you please tell us your year of birth?

1988.

Thank you. So first of all, when did you arrive in Milton Keynes?

23rd August, 2003.

Sorry, could we just...if I...[unintelligible]...you give me a full sentence.

Oh yeah, absolutely.

Do that again. Thank you.

I arrived in England on 23rd August, 2003.

Okay, thank you. When you arrived, what were your first impressions of Milton Keynes?

It was a wonderful place. I really liked the openness. It reminded me of my home town Islamabad, where I'm originally from, in Pakistan. So it was like moving from one home to another home. I felt instantly comfortable.

Fantastic. So, you said in your emails beforehand you were part of quite a small Asian community in Milton Keynes at the time. Could you tell us a bit more about that please?

So, my mosque, for the last fourteen years, has been Wolverton mosque and I still remember, back then, Wolverton mosque had probably a hundred and fifty members. Now it's exceeded over fifteen hundred. So, back when I was here, we had very few halal shops; we had very few options if you wanted to cook at home. We mostly had to go to Luton. So from the time that I moved here in 2003 to 2017, Milton Keynes is a very different place for my community.

Oh, fantastic. So, you also said that you've been to university and come back. Where did you go to university and how did those places compare to Milton Keynes?

I went to Middlesex University for my bachelors; then I went to Oxford Brookes, in Oxford; then I went back to London twice for a masters and law school; and, all four times, Milton Keynes was always my base. My family was here but, more than anything else, Milton Keynes was home. I'd already left one home behind, in Pakistan; I didn't want to lose another one.

That's really lovely. Thank you. So you say that Milton Keynes has changed a lot over the time that you've been here. What kind of changes have you seen in the Asian community, like you were saying, from being quite a small base in Wolverton? What kind of changes have you seen from having a small mosque...[unintelligible 00:02:20]..?

Whenever somebody asks me that question I always think about one particular incident in my life, after moving to Milton Keynes. Back in school – I went to a private school – so, right next to us was Stantonbury School and then there was Bury Lawn School, now Webber Independent. At that time there was only three hundred and fifty/four hundred students from nursery all the way to sixth form and I was in sixth form. And there were four Asian students in the entire school, so I didn't have many options because two of them were my siblings...[laughs]. So I was a bit narrow in my escape from my family every single day.

But then, when I turned eighteen, we started going clubbing twice a week and one day one of the bouncers came up to me and he said, "You know, you're very easy to remember because you're the only Asian who comes out clubbing." So that really told me that, you know, at that time there weren't many Asians that were actually interacting with Central Milton Keynes, more than anything else. But now, if you go there, there's lots of people wearing hijab, they're wearing shalwar kameez and saris. They're very comfortable expressing their own culture. So I think that's a huge change from what it was to now.

Excellent. That's really nice to hear how the community's changed. You said when you first came to Milton Keynes that you felt instantly at home. Do you think, then, there was a good connection with the community that was already here? So, you say there was a small Asian community, do you think that community integrated quite well?

Absolutely. I was very fortunate in the sense that my dad is a doctor and we moved to Milton Keynes because he could do locum work. He could be central in Milton Keynes and move around all over the place from London, Oxford, Cambridge, wherever he needed to be. So we had lots of families, who were already established here, who were from the medical field. I think, at that time, there were probably about forty-five or fifty. But then there was the military side of things as well because my dad comes from the army and they were about two/three hundred people who used to come together every summer and even now they do that, where they have cricket matches and barbeques and everything. So there was a very strong-knit community, not just in Milton Keynes but because Milton Keynes is so central to everywhere.

Fantastic. Can you tell us a little bit about your family home and who built it?

It was built by Prestige.

Sorry, yeah. Could you restate that one? Sorry.

Yeah, sorry.

To...just restate as a full sentence.

My family home was built by Prestige – they're Iranian. We found land in Loughton and because my family had been in Milton Keynes for fourteen years we had never considered moving anywhere else. There was a few times when we considered London but then it wasn't the same as Milton Keynes because it wasn't as central and, more than anything else, we went to school here, we came back from university here, all of our friends ended up being here as well. So then we decided to build a home and we built a very Pakistani-style home as well, which makes it even more home for us, in the fact that now we have a place that everyone in my family knows that they can come to whenever they visit England.

00:05:23

That's really nice.

[Roger] Could you explain, what do you mean by a Pakistani home? Talk to Moss.

Yeah, yeah, of course, yeah. Tell us a bit more about that.

So, by Pakistani home, what I mean is it's got lots of bedrooms, very high ceilings, lots of windows all over the place. We have a private driveway, big garden in the back where we can host big dinners in it. We can just invite everyone that we know. So it gives it that feeling of family all the time because sometimes you host forty/fifty-people dinners, so...because it's that kind of home. In England you mostly see very small, compact houses. This is a very big home.

Okay, thank you for elaborating on that. Do you have any special memories of your home as you've gotten comfortable there over the years?

I think there's a few. Probably the first house party that I ever threw – where I come from there's no concept of house parties – being sixteen, coming here for the first time and throwing my first house party and getting my friend's dog drunk. That was probably very different to what I've experienced in my life ever before. But if you want a more PG one, I guess it's just, when I moved to my new home...I was new in Milton Keynes when 7/7 happened and that was...I'd never experienced being a minority before because I grew up in a country where we were the majority and, for the first time, I felt how distant you can become. But I'm so fortunate that, even though I wasn't with my community, the friends that I had, they were so welcoming and they started asking me questions; and that was the point at which I became friends with everyone I went to school with and that's why we still remain friends to this day, because of the openness they showed in understanding what was happening, instead of pointing at me and saying, "Well, you're one of them."

It's very nice to hear how you were supported then.

Absolutely.

Is there...would you say, in that respect, that Milton Keynes is maybe different to other places or is...you know, would you have found that, if you'd been living in Luton or anywhere else? Or London or wherever?

One of the big problems that I've always had, which is why I work in the charity sector now, is I don't want Milton Keynes to end up like Luton and Bradford and Birmingham where there's such segregation within the communities, with the BAME communities so separated from the British community as such. If it wasn't for Milton Keynes being what it is, which is a group of migrants coming together forming this new city, which has just turned fifty,

I don't think...I believe, from the experiences I've heard of other people, of 7/7 and 9/11, all those incidents, I don't think I would have been welcomed with such an open mind.

Thank you. Could you just clarify, you said BM..?

BAMER – Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic communities.

Okay, thank you very much. So, Milton Keynes has just turned fifty. Do you think there've been any specific successes or failures of Milton Keynes in that time, up until now?

The biggest success for me – I don't like to focus on the failures too much because I think we're still a work in progress. Fifty years isn't a lot to say that we've failed in any particular area – the one success I think we have is community engagement and listening to the community, more than anything else. I've been very fortunate to work with Community Action; I've been very fortunate to work with the number one BAME organisation that holds an event. And the people of Milton Keynes are always being heard. They always have somewhere to go to express something but, more than that, every single demographic has their own circle of people and then they have the wider community to engage with. So I think we've come a very, very long way from when I came here in 2003 to 2017 and we're moving ahead very quickly and we continue to be the pioneers of everything that's happening right now, in terms of community engagement. So I think we definitely have made a lot of good progress and I think that's what we should focus on.

I was going to ask you what you think the next fifty years has in store, so do you think you could elaborate on that? You said we're still moving forward. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Well, the next fifty years, for me personally, we have to continue to grow the way we are; we have to continue to give a voice to our citizens; we have to get community mobilisers; we have to get community champions; we have to continue to engage the council, the private sector and the third sector all together because without that harmony between all three, we can't keep Milton Keynes the way it is. It has to remain a warm, comforting place. But, more than anything else, keep the roundabouts because I love to drive...*[laughs]*.

00:10:15

Thank you.

[Roger] Could I just ask...this thing about, you know, you obviously see Milton Keynes as special, do you want to elaborate a bit on this bit about – you were talking about the fact that

everyone is a migrant – to what extent do you think that is the key factor that shapes the place?

So, over the last fourteen/fifteen years I've only come across one twenty-year-old who was born in Milton Keynes and, spending as much time as I have here, I think that's a big statement to make. In the future there will be loads more. But the main thing is that everyone who comes here, comes here for the opportunity that Milton Keynes presents, very much like my father did. He had options to go to London; he had options to go to Oxford. I had the same thing. I was offered positions under Lords and everywhere but nothing made as much sense as coming to Milton Keynes and being a part of what's been created here, as such. There's lots of established places you can go to but, again, how many places give you the opportunity to work on the ground level and actually make a change for the future?

Maybe a silly question but, do you see yourself staying in Milton Keynes?

For the foreseeable future, I hope so. As long as the opportunities to work...sorry, I'll just start again.

Would you be able to restate that as well...

Absolutely, yeah.

...with the question, did you see yourself staying here?

For the future, I see myself in Milton Keynes. This is my home; it's been my home for fourteen years and I can't stress that enough because I am connected to this place. Regardless of how many opportunities I've had to leave, I stay here because this is my hometown and I want to see it get better. With Milton Keynes University, with so many different projects coming up, I want to be a part of them. I was part of MK:Smart, I was part of CAPE, I was a part of what Community Action was building towards, I'm still a part of what the BAME population in Milton Keynes does. We're about to come to a third of BAME minority groups in Milton Keynes. People like me can help shape the future and I hope more people see it that way as well. But, more than anything else, I think Milton Keynes remains the place that it was when I came here, when my dad decided to stay here, and that's a place of opportunity that's central to everywhere else.

Brilliant.

[Roger] Fantastic.

Any further questions?

I've got a question...

Yeah, very popular...[laughs]. I'd like to ask you to tell us a little bit more about the organisations that you worked with and also the highlights of working with them. What's been your highlights of those?

So, the first organisation I worked for in the charity sector was Community Action Milton Keynes. I started as a volunteer and then I ended up heading their media team. The one thing that I found there, more than anything else, was the importance of community work and community champions, seeing my colleagues, day in, day out, in the communities, working tirelessly to make sure that everyone was heard. But, more than that, it was the range of activities that they offered.

Moving across to Milton Keynes Islamic Arts Heritage and Culture, which is now Culture Connect, the one thing I found there, above all else, was how many partners we had working with us, and that just shows the appetite that people have, within Milton Keynes and within the region, to show that they are concerned about what everyone is saying. It's easy to brush people under the carpet and say, "Look, your concerns don't mean that much because you're only 0.5 of the population." However, nobody in my experience in the charity sector has ever done that and that's why I stay here.

Yeah, I'd just like...you mentioned clubbing earlier. I'd just like to...as a young man, do you feel there's enough, culturally, for you to do – you know, things to do for young people in Milton Keynes – and where do you go, what do you do, that type of thing?

Absolutely, so one of the activities that I like to encourage people to do is get out in Milton Keynes, go out and see what's happening. Milton Keynes has so many things to do. We've got the Peace Pagoda, we've got all of Willen Lake, you've got all of Furzton Lake. There's so many small activities. There's never a shortage of stuff to do. On a weekend, if you're bored, just go online, look up what's happening on a group Facebook page or anything like that because there's something happening in a small community somewhere. Why? Because Milton Keynes is designed to be active and the reason for that is the community centres found in every single estate. And that's why, whenever my cousins or anyone comes over, I just tell them that..."What do you want to do? Let's go out and just find something to do in Milton Keynes, instead of going to London all the time.

00:15:09

Could I...(I was going to ask him one about the club). You said you were the only Asian that was there in the club. Now that is not

under-surprising, is it, because in fact, you know, amongst the Pakistani Muslim culture, there is a thing about music and dance and so on. It's not exactly encouraged.

Absolutely.

How did you, (1) manage to get away with it and what was people's reaction within your own community, to that?

And what club? [Laughter]

They're all closed down now, unfortunately.

That's not your fault, is it?

So, one of the things that I found when I came to Milton Keynes, when I used to go clubbing as an eighteen-year-old with no other Asian friends, was how differently people approached life. Even to this day, by the way – let me just fast-forward to 2017 – and tell you that some groups will not meet in pubs just because they don't want to offend the Muslim attendees. However, the fact that, back in that time, that community, they didn't judge me for that, they didn't have any kind of apprehension about me going clubbing, because we all came here under the same circumstances, which was a better opportunity, and we were all so busy just enjoying Milton Keynes and what was out there. I still remember one of the first families – they still remain here and they're based in Loughton right behind where we live – and their son was quite a bit older than me and I told him that I go clubbing all the time and he said, "Yes, so do I. That's what you do because we don't have many Asian friends but we can go out and mingle with everyone, can't we?" So it was the social aspect more than anything else, so I don't think there was anyone to judge me or anyone to stop me from going out clubbing, enjoying myself because that's what we did and...well, I still do, so...

00:16:55

END OF INTERVIEW