

Questions to Professor Humayun Ansari, Royal Holloway University of London, at The Urswick School, Hackney, London

In school, did you face any racism because of your skin colour or your religion?

Absolutely. It's quite interesting, I was the only non-white person there. In the sixth form I was made a prefect and one of the duties we had was when people were outside the school we went to get them and told them they needed to come back into the school. And some of these students would have friends, and they would be on motor bikes. On one occasion when I was doing that one of the young people on a motorbike called me a 'black nigger'. And then when I was walking back drove his motor bike straight at me. So, there was that experience when I was at school. And that of course has an impact on how you are shaped in your future life.

Which kind of Muslim are you? For example, some Christians are Catholics.

I come from a Sunni background. And I don't know if you are aware, Sunnis form round about 90% of the 1 and a half billion Muslim population around the world. Indian and Pakistani Muslims by and large are Sunnis, whereas if you go to Iran they have a predominantly Shia population, and they form about 10% of the Muslim population around the globe.

Why did you want to come to England?

Well, if you are thirteen or fourteen you don't have much of a choice if your parents decide that's where you are going. But it wasn't like that. I really did want to come to England. And it was partly because my father had already been here. He had been here in 1938 and he went back and graduated. He said, look, England is a wonderful place. He didn't go as far as to say it's a land of milk and honey, the streets are paved with gold. He didn't go as far as that. But he was an ardent Anglophile. He thought the education system here was absolutely fantastic, the best in the world. And he had experienced it first hand. So, he wanted his children to come to England. My eldest brother came here in 1952. Then my other brothers came. And then finally I arrived with my younger brother. So, that is what my parents wanted. They wanted me to come here and be educated because then I could actually progress, not just here but in Pakistan as well. But also, I used to watch a lot of films when I was in Pakistan. And quite a lot of them were produced in England. And those images that were there felt wonderful. And I felt curious about this place where all those images were coming from. That was actually a great motivator for me to come to England.

Are you still in touch with your younger brother?

Yes, in fact he lives not very far from me. I live in Windsor, he lives in Slough, which is about fifteen minutes drive from where I am. So we are very much in touch with each other. We both went to school here, went to university. He qualified as a barrister.

What about your older brothers?

Yes, one of them lives in Slough. He is a lot older than me. I occasionally visit him, he comes and visits me. In fact what has happened is that, like other Muslim people who come here I have got a very large extended family. Not just brothers, but cousins and uncles and aunts. And they live in different parts of London and beyond London. My sister lives in Pakistan.

If you had one thing in your life you could change, what would it be?

I have never thought about that really. There are lots of things one would like to see changed but certainly I would like to see a greater amount of tolerance in society, tolerance of each other. I am interested in looking at how we can get on with each other, I think that is extremely important. We don't have to like each other necessarily, but we don't have to be hostile, be aggressive towards each other. We can try and understand each other a lot more. And I suppose there isn't enough of that.

What is your best memory of school?

There was a lovely time in 1965 when there was an education cruise ship taking sixth form pupils from various schools in Surrey to Greece and beyond. It was subsidised, so it was very cheap - £46. I had to earn £23 of those because my family was only able to pay half of the cost. I have wonderful memories of that particular trip. We went on the train to Genoa, in Italy. From Genoa we went to Crete, then Athens, Dubrovnik and Venice. That adventure stays with me very clearly still.

What was your first impression when you moved to England when you were a boy of thirteen or fourteen?

I remember clearly when I arrived here, it was the 6th May 1962. My feeling was that England, London, was very, very modern. But Heathrow, where I arrived, was not like it is now. It was just a range of barracks, shacks, no more than that, because it had just started being developed. So that wasn't terribly impressive. Then, a novelty was being on the underground, the tube. I had never seen anything like that and it was a very exciting experience. And then television was another novelty at that time. But it just felt very, very cold and relatively dark. Also, it was for me quite an eye opener to see white people cleaning roads, being in those sorts of jobs. Because that is not what we had heard about or what we had seen in India and Pakistan, where they were always the rulers. White people could be from very ordinary backgrounds, doing all sorts of jobs and that was new for me.

How has becoming and studying the history of Muslims in Britain changed or shaped your life?

It has shaped my life in that I have a greater amount of understanding of how Muslims are in different parts of the world, what makes them tick and how, perhaps, I can engage with the way that they operate. So, I suppose it hasn't changed a great deal in terms of how I live my life, but generally speaking it has given me an understanding of how Muslim communities evolve.

Why did Pakistan break away from India?

One of the things that we have got to recognise is that India is absolutely huge and it has got immense variety. We talk about variety here, but India is a whole sub-continent. We are talking about over a billion and a half people living in that particular area, which is a sixth of the world's population. When we are talking about variety there we mean ethnic variety, in terms of skin colour or race, but also in cultural terms there are lots of differences among people. In terms of religion there are lots of differences as well. So, what we find is that there are very substantial numbers of Muslims there, but the predominant community is the Hindu community. Certainly during the British period the way that society was organised was on the basis of religion. So there were differences and those differences led to a certain number of tensions and those tensions developed primarily between Hindus on the one hand and Muslims on the other. Muslims, who had been ruling for hundreds of years in India, felt that they were going to be oppressed after independence if they remained in a unified India. So they started demanding a separate homeland where they could live their Muslim lives in a much more effective and fuller way. Finally, that demand was accepted and in 1947, when India became independent, it then became split up into a predominantly Hindu India on the one hand and an overwhelmingly Muslim Pakistan on the other.

Why do you think it's good to study history?

How do we try and understand what is happening at the moment if we don't understand how we have actually got here? History is something that we live with in our personal lives as well, don't we? We want to know where we have actually come from, what our roots are. On television you find programmes like 'Who do you think you are?' People search for their historical backgrounds, and they want to go as far as they possibly can because finding out about their past enables them to think about themselves in the present. You would want to think about: where do I come from? How am I situated in the community that I am in? And history enables you to try and understand those sorts of questions.

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