

Interview with Respondent 0578

Date: 03.11.2014

Location: Asian Centre, Wood Green

Interviewer: Emma Pett

Interviewer: Do you want to start by saying a little bit about when you came to the UK, why you came to the UK, was it early 1960s?

Respondent: I came to the UK in September 1961, and I came mainly for studies, that was why I came to this country. But I've been here fifty years now, and I sometimes think, I came for studies and I'm still here [laughs] so it happened for me that I didn't go back, I'm still in this country ....

Interviewer: And what did you come to study, what subject?

Respondent: Accountancy.

Interviewer: Accountancy, was that in London?

Respondent: In London, yes.

Interviewer: In London... which college, where were you studying?

Respondent: Well, it was, I think it wasn't a college as such, I came with the Association of [...] Accountants, I came to this country and then I had to find myself a college.

Interviewer: And you found one in London?

Respondent: In London, yes.

Interviewer: And when you came over, were you about 18, or were you a bit older than that then?

Respondent: No, I was a bit older than that I think, about 20.

Interviewer: 20. And you, did you find somewhere to live nearby the college, or...?

Respondent: Well, actually it was myself and my uncle, who was the same age as me, we came together, and somebody, one of our friends who used to live here, he helped us find a room, and we lived in Stoke Newington, you know?

Interviewer: I know, yes ...

Respondent: And that's where we lived for a year, and then my wife, because I was already married before I came, my wife joined me after a year, and then we had a flat.

Interviewer: And did you stay in the Stoke Newington area?

Respondent: Yes. I found in those days because it was still ... the country was still recovering from the war, you know, and in the first instance I didn't like it. I used to cry, why had I left my nice house, back home, living in a nice country, nice place ...

Interviewer: Where were you living?

Respondent: In Pakistan, in Lahore.

Interviewer: In Lahore, OK ...

Respondent: Yes, my father was Assistant Registrar in the Supreme Court.

Interviewer: Mmm, so you had a nice home? Family and friends?

Respondent: Yes, nice home, nice car, everything, you know [laughs]

Interviewer: So it was difficult to begin with?

Respondent: Very, very difficult, yes, I didn't know what ... I had never cooked in my life! So, me and my uncle both struggled [laughs].

Interviewer: [laughs] Was it a bedsit, or a flat?

Respondent: No, it was a bedsit, a double room, it had two single beds in it.

Interviewer: So, when you first came to London, and you were studying, is that when you started going to the cinema, or was that later in the 1960s?

Respondent: No we started when we found ... first of all, we had the cinema in Lahore ... me and my uncle (he's passed away a long time ago, now), we were both keen on cinema even back home. We used to go to see English films, Indian films, mostly the films we used to watch were English films, American films ...

Interviewer: Oh, in Lahore?

Respondent: In Lahore.

Interviewer: Oh, so which English films would you watch when you were in Lahore?

Respondent: Well, I remember, I ... in those days, nowadays you start to see films in three dimension ...

Interviewer: 3-D

Respondent: 3-D. In those days I saw 3-D films

Interviewer: Yes, with cardboard glasses on?

Respondent: Yes, with the cardboard glasses. A few films I've seen like that, for example, War of the Worlds, yes?

Interviewer: War of the Worlds, yes, so you saw that in Lahore?

Respondent: Yes, we were very keen on watching that type of film, aliens coming to this ...

Interviewer: Science fiction? Sci-fi films?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: OK.

Respondent: And I remember watching a film, Niagara. It was so good I watched it two or three times!

Interviewer: Did you [laughs] At the cinema each time?

Respondent: At the cinema [...] cinema in Lahore, and another cinema, Regal Cinema, there were four cinemas there that used to show English films. And then I saw ... there's so many films I've watched, a lot of them I don't remember the names ...

Interviewer: So that was all before you moved to London, and then when you moved to London in 1961, you already knew Hollywood films ... so, can you remember when you first went, can you remember your first experience of going to the cinema in London? Where you went, was it in the West End, or ...?

Respondent: Yes, in the West End, I think we went to see, was it Ben Hur or something like that. We used to like those sort of films, biblical type ...

Interviewer: Epic films

Respondent: Epic films, yes.

Interviewer: What did you like about them?

Respondent: It was because they looked very adventurous, very historical, a mixture of different things ...

Interviewer: Yes, was it mainly the story, then? Or was it also the actors?

Respondent: Well, actors, of course, because, in our young age, American actors we used to talk about, and then if a film comes they are in, we used to go to watch that, because of the famous actors and actresses, you know?

Interviewer: Yes. Which ones can you remember, were there ... did you have favourites?

Respondent: Richard Burton. Elizabeth Taylor... so many names, I cannot remember ...

Interviewer: OK. And can you remember, I think you might have mentioned this to me last time we talked, can you remember which cinemas you went to, particularly?

Respondent: In London?

Interviewer: Yes, in London.

Respondent: Leicester Square Theatre. There was another theatre, I've forgotten the name ... it was on Tottenham Court Road.

Interviewer: On Tottenham Court Road ... Her Majesty's Theatre?

Respondent: Yes, Her Majesty's Theatre, yes. We saw Mary Poppins there, I think.

Interviewer: What did you think of Mary Poppins?

Respondent: Well, a bit childish, but it was a very, very interesting story.

Interviewer: Yes. You enjoyed it?

Respondent: Yes, very enjoyable.

Interviewer: Can you remember anything about the atmosphere of the cinemas? Were they very different to the cinemas in Lahore, or were they quite similar?

Respondent: Very similar, really. There's not much difference. Cinemas in Lahore, in those days, I don't know about now, especially English cinemas, they were very luxuriously built. Very nice seating, and everything.

Interviewer: Comfortable, nice carpets?

Respondent: Nice carpets, curtain on the screen as well, it swept sideways at the start of the film.

Interviewer: Was it the same in terms of having the usherettes come around with the refreshments?

Respondent: That's right, yes. In those days, obviously there, ladies didn't work, so it was men. Nowadays it's different, you know.

Interviewer: Yes, in the sixties ...

Respondent: Of course, I'm talking about before that, the fifties, the first film I saw was 1953, back home, when I passed my exams my father said you can go and watch a film. In those days you're not so independent yourself, you ask your parents permission for a lot of things, this is different from English society.

Interviewer: Yes. And when you were talking to me on Friday, you said it helped you learn a little bit about English culture, when you went to see some of the British films.

Respondent: Of course it did, yes.

Interviewer: Can you think of any examples? Did you watch ... some of the films in the 1960s were watch they call 'kitchen sink,' you know, very realistic ... did you go and see that sort of film as well? Films like 'Saturday Night and Sunday Morning'?

Respondent: Yes, we did. I forgotten what it's called, I went to see this film, I've forgotten its name, where this actress speaks like cockney language. An American actress, where she acted as a cockney in that film...

Interviewer: Er ... 'My Fair Lady'?

Respondent: No, it was a different one, it was to do with the language ... she did that acting so good that she was awarded for acting in that. She spoke better than a cockney person in that film.

Interviewer: Anne Bancroft? So you enjoyed those sorts of films just as much as the epics?

Respondent: Yes. I liked films with a message, like [...] with the Islamic history. 'The Ten Commandments,' bible stories, those films, you know.

Interviewer: Yes, that's great. So, when you first came over, you were going to the cinema with your uncle, who was the same age as you ... just the two of, or did you have, was it ever a bigger social event than that?

Respondent: Yes, we had made friends afterwards, we had two or three more friends with us ...

Interviewer: Yes, and you went, did you buy a ticket and stay in the cinema all afternoon, or did you buy a ticket for one film?

Respondent: Well, there was a cinema in Bethnal Green, belonged to this Bengali chap, it was called Dean's Cinema, it used to show three films in a day, on Sundays. Because we were doing nothing at home, bored, you know. And so we used to go in the morning, buy three tickets together and watch all those three films. In between we would have refreshments, or whatever.

Interviewer: So, was he showing Bollywood films?

Respondent: Bollywood films, yes.

Interviewer: So that was your usual Sunday entertainment, was it? Was that throughout the sixties, or was it a bit later than that?

Respondent: Well, later than that, because my wife joined me a year later on, so later than that. I used to take my wife to see films, you know.

Interviewer: So, when your wife moved over, did you watch different sorts of films, then?

Respondent: Different, Bollywood and Hollywood.

Interviewer: Did she prefer Bollywood?

Respondent: She did, yes. Sometimes I used to go with my uncle to see the Hollywood films.

Interviewer: Was that because she liked to have some of her home culture ...?

Respondent: That's right, exactly, and because of English language, as well. Because I could understand more English than her.

Interviewer: Mmm, so she enjoyed the Bollywood films more because she understood them better?

Respondent: That's right. Because I was educated in English schools as child, then I went to the college, it was all mostly English, all the time.

Interviewer: And when you watched Bollywood films, did you buy refreshments?

Respondent: Yes, we used to buy refreshments, yes. Sometimes inside the cinema, they had refreshment room, like a restaurant kind of thing, cup of tea.

Interviewer: Like a café?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: And at the end, did they play the national anthem?

Respondent: Um, I don't remember that ... I think they did, yes. There was another thing they used to do in those days, before the film started, they used to show the Pathe news, you know?

Interviewer: Yes. Did you like that?

Respondent: Yes, And the language, English language spoke in those newsreels was different than what the accents are now, entirely different.

Interviewer: Yes, what they call RP, received pronunciation, they spoke a bit like the Queen?

Respondent: That's right, the Queen's English [laughs].

Interviewer: Do you remember any of the actors or actresses speaking like that, was that noticeable to you? Elizabeth Taylor, Julie Christie?

Respondent: Elizabeth Taylor, yes. There was a film, 'Queen of Sheba,' she was very good in that film.

Interviewer: 'Cleopatra'? She did quite a few historical films, didn't she ... what about the films they call the 'swinging sixties' films? Films like 'Alfie' and 'Darling', did you ever watch any of those?

Respondent: No, I was not into those films. I always ... because back home we used to watch big films, historical films ... adventure-type of films. Or the aliens, and things like that, War of the Worlds, for example.

Interviewer: So, you had favourite genres, really, didn't you? You weren't so interested in those 'swinging sixties' sorts of films. What about things like James Bond, did you ever watch those?

Respondent: Oh yes, James Bond, we liked James Bond films.

Interviewer: Yes? Can you remember any James Bond films from the sixties? 'From Russia With Love' or 'Dr. No'?

Respondent: Dr No I've seen.

Interviewer: What did you think of James Bond films, compared to Bollywood films, because Bollywood films have a lot of action and adventure, as well, don't they?

Respondent: Yes, the action in Bollywood films, in those days, it was very sort of 'made up', it looked artificial, whereas these sort of films like James Bond, it looks very real. The way they are acted and the scenes and everything, it looks so real. It doesn't look like a drama, it looks like real life.

Interviewer: Yes, there was no musical element ...

Respondent: That's right. Comedy films, we also used to watch.

Interviewer: Yes, can you remember which comedy films you saw?

Respondent: I don't know why, we had more taste for American films than English films. English films used to be good, but the standard of English films was not as good as the American films.

Interviewer: They weren't as big budget, were they?

Respondent: That's right.

Interviewer: Can you remember American comedies that you used to see?

Respondent: Hollywood or Bust! I think that was the best American comedy film we saw, with Jerry Lewis [laughs].

Interviewer: Yes, you liked Jerry Lewis?

Respondent: [laughs] Yes, we used to see Jerry Lewis films all the time!

Interviewer: Did you ever watch ... I know that there were some cinema chains in the 1960s, there was one called 'Classic Cinemas,' that would show older films, and they called them vintage films, can you remember going to see the older films?

Respondent: No, no.

Interviewer: So you mainly went to see the new releases?

Respondent: That's right, always new releases.

Interviewer: And did you ever buy any of the merchandise. You know, posters, programmes ... they had programmes for sale at the west end cinemas?

Respondent: Not much really.

Interviewer: You didn't keep any mementoes?

Respondent: No. I wish I could, now sometimes I think to myself, I should have done that.

A: Yes? Would you like to be able to look back and remember all the films you saw?

Respondent: Yes, I want to.

Interviewer: How often do you think went to the cinema in the sixties?

Respondent: In the sixties, nearly every week. Once a week.

Interviewer: At the weekend?

Respondent: Yes, when I was back home, in college time, sometimes twice a week. Obviously in those days, I'm talking about back home, there was no other entertainment, apart from these films. There was no television those days. Now the television has changed quite a bit ...

Interviewer: It has, definitely. Ok, so towards the end of the 1960s, did anything change, you talked about going to the cinema every week, did you carry on, or...?

Respondent: Well, I carried on, but as I started working and all that, my speed of watching films actually slowed down. I didn't watch that many films afterwards. I used to go and see Indian films once a week, maybe. Or once a month sometimes, I gradually slowed down.

Interviewer: So, when you went to see Indian films in London, was there, was that at Her Majesty's Theatre, or was it somewhere else?

Respondent: No, different cinemas. When I came to London in the sixties there was ... Indian films didn't have a license to be exhibited in the UK, in the cinemas. So, what we did, some people made a film club, and they used to send us tickets by post ... so, I became a member of that, and we used to go to Scala Theatre ...

Interviewer: The Scala? Oh, OK, in King's Cross?

Respondent: In Warren Street.

Interviewer: In Warren Street, OK.

Respondent: So, we used to go there on Sundays.

Interviewer: Oh, that's interesting, so they did a Bollywood programme at the Scala? Can you remember when that started?

Respondent: I don't know, when I came, '61, it was, maybe that time it was started then.

Interviewer: And how did you ... you found out about that from other friends?

Respondent: Yes, when we stayed with our friend, he was the one who was going there, he introduced us and I became a member there.

Interviewer: And when you went to the Bollywood films at the Scala, was there anything else that was different to going to see other films ... so it was a club, did that mean that it was the same people every week?

Respondent: Most times, same people every week, sometimes used to go there to watch a film, and also to meet friends as well, because lot of people used to go ...

Interviewer: So you knew a lot of the faces when you walked in, so it must've felt a bit different to going to the cinema to see something like 'Mary Poppins'?

Respondent: That's right, it was not only Indian film club, it was also social club you could say, chatting on the pavement.

Interviewer: Did it have a name? You said you got the tickets in the post, did you sign up?

Respondent: Just called, I think, 'Indian Film Club'

Interviewer: And so, what happened, you paid a membership once a year, or ..?

Respondent: No, I think there was no membership as such, you just register yourself.

Interviewer: You registered and then you got the tickets?

Respondent: Yes, because, the reason also, watching a lot of Bollywood films, for Pakistanis, because in Pakistan in those days Indian films were banned. Sometimes I used to go with a friend, across the border to Amritsar, to watch Indian films!

Interviewer: Ah, you used to sneak over?

Respondent: Yes, we made a passport, a visa, and used to go to India.

Interviewer: So, the Indian Film Club at the Scala, did that show Pakistani films as well?

Respondent: No, only Indian films.

Interviewer: Ah, OK.

Respondent: I also see some actresses coming in there, Meena Kumari. They came with a new film, introducing new film ...

Interviewer: Oh, really?

Respondent: Yes, I've seen Meena Kumari [laughs]

Interviewer: Wow, amazing, so they came to the film club, when their films came out, and they would introduce it, and then you'd watch it, and would they stay and watch it with you?

Respondent: No, they just came and then gone.

Interviewer: Did they dress up, were they all glamorous?

Respondent: Dressed up, yes.

Interviewer: Did you dress up when you went to the club?

Respondent: No, we just wore ordinary clothes, casual you know.

Interviewer: Well, that's really interesting. How many people used to go, can you remember? Was it quite a big club?

Respondent: It was a big hall, must be at least 500 people, a lot of people. And also a restaurant around that area used to be full of people that night. It was an Italian café we used to go to. And also in the backstreet there was a Pakistani café, self-service in those days, they called it, like a canteen. So you take the tray, pay for it and that's it.

Interviewer: Well, that's fascinating ...

Respondent: Mostly ... used to go there, but when we used to go to see the film we used to go in that restaurant.

Interviewer: So, did your wife like going there, then, if they showed Bollywood films?

Respondent: Yes, that's right.

Interviewer: Oh, that's lovely. And you carried on going there throughout the sixties?

Respondent: That's right.

Interviewer: Can you remember how long that club went on for? Because the Scala closed, didn't it?

Respondent: After '62, '63, I think the other cinemas obtained the licenses to show these films, so then we used to go to Walthamstow...

Interviewer: OK, there was somewhere in Walthamstow that showed Bollywood films?

Respondent: That's right.

Interviewer: And did you like watching Bollywood films as much as your wife? You said she preferred those films. Or did you enjoy the American films just as much?

Respondent: Honestly speaking, I enjoyed the American films more!

Interviewer: Did you? [laughs] Why, can you say why?

Respondent: [laughs] They have some sort of different stories, different interest, whereas the Indian film, the Bollywood film, is based mainly on romance, you know?

Interviewer: Mmm, a little bit repetitive, maybe?

Respondent: That's right. They just twist the stories in different ways, but basically it is the same thing. They bring dancers into that, just for entertainment, but it's got no link to the story. Sometimes they're singing, on top of the mountain, I mean, it's ridiculous, but we just see it for entertainment purposes, that's what I think.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: Whereas, American films, they're based on history, they're based on real stories, sometimes they're fiction, but at least, there's some reality you can see. Also, you learn something out of that.

Interviewer: So, it's a style as much as anything, isn't it, the realism?

Respondent: Yes, for example, the Hollywood film, like 'The Ten Commandments', nobody has ever made a film like that again.

Interviewer: No.

Respondent: That depicts all the history that belongs to Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. That's why most of the people used to go and watch that film. I watched it so many times, not once.

Interviewer: Really? Did you go back to see it at the cinema?

Respondent: Yes, I liked seeing it in the cinema because those ... there used to be cinemascope, you know, and we used to see that film only in cinemascope, because they looked ...

Interviewer: They looked better?

Respondent: Yes, they looked better and had stereophonic sound, in those days, particularly ... stereophonic sound.

Interviewer: If you could pick a favourite film from the 1960s, what would it be? Or is there too many that you enjoyed?

Respondent: Well...

Interviewer: You mentioned the epic films, Ben Hur, and science-fiction films ...

Respondent: The Ten Commandments was the best. And, um ...

Interviewer: Was one of the reasons The Ten Commandments was a favourite because you felt it spoke across religions?

Respondent: Well, you can say that, of course, it appealed, because a lot of people took ... Today, to develop knowledge, you have to read so many books, whereas that film gave everything concise, everything in order, and so much from one film, you know.

Interviewer: So really, for you, some of these films were more than entertainment, then?

Respondent: Definitely.

Interviewer: Because a lot of people talk about films being entertainment, like 'Mary Poppins', but some of these films meant more than that to you? That it was actually a form of education and learning?

Respondent: That's right. That's the reason I used to go to watch American films, I like that idea. To learn something out of that. And gain some knowledge.

Interviewer: OK, can you remember ... so The Ten Commandments was one film you gained some knowledge from, were there any other ones that you feel you learned something from?

Respondent: Again, there's one other film called 'Message'. That is also a good film, very similar to Ten Commandments, but more to do with the Islamic side of the story.

Interviewer: That was a sixties film, was it?

Respondent: No, that was a seventies film, it came later on.

Interviewer: What about the historical films?

Respondent: Historical, yes, like Cleopatra?

Interviewer: Yes. Or were they just entertainment?

Respondent: Yes, that's right.

Interviewer: OK. Well, that's fascinating. Is there anything else that you think we've left out? Obviously cinema was very important to you, and was one of your regular activities.

Respondent: I think I told you the other day about Cinerama.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: Yes, that used to be in Piccadilly Circus.

Interviewer: Yes, tell me about it again [laughs].

Respondent: When I came to this country I heard about this back home, Cinerama, but I was very keen to see it. So, me and my uncle, first thing we did, we went to see that Cinerama. It was a wonderful, I think, idea, for projecting film. From your right hand to your left hand, a full screen, you know.

Interviewer: Yes. And what did they show?

Respondent: The only film I saw there was a film called 'Seven Wonders of the World'. And they show you, a pilot starts from a small aeroplane, single aeroplane, from San Francisco, he goes under the bridge there. When he starts the aeroplane it feels as if you are this pilot, you look up from the dashboard, on the side is that window, on this side is this window on the screen.

Interviewer: You felt like you were inside?

Respondent: You felt like you were the pilot. And then it flew – you could see it going up and down like that, as if you're going to dip in the water in a minute [laughs]. So, it was so real, you know, and not only that, it shows you the places I think no other film might have shown. It takes you to so many different countries in the world, and shows you all the wonders that are there. Including Pakistan, there's a place called Hunza Valley, in Pakistan, it's the most beautiful part of the world, and they were showing that in that film.

Interviewer: Amazing. So, did it cost more, was it a special occasion to go there?

Respondent: It didn't cost more than other cinemas. We only went to see once, just to experience what it was like.

Interviewer: And where was it, in Piccadilly?

Respondent: Yes, In Piccadilly, I've forgotten the name ... there was another one, it was called Circlorama. Circlorama, that was in Piccadilly itself. On one of the streets.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Respondent: I think it was a Russian idea. And you don't sit in a cinema, you stand. And there's a screen all around you.

Interviewer: Oh, I think I've seen pictures of this. Circlorama.

Respondent: And just like, they're showing you like you are in the jungle, standing in the middle, somebody is shooting from the side. One side is a tiger, or a lion is coming, and he shoots, and you hear the bullet going, as if it's going near you, right past you [laughs].

Interviewer: [laughs] That's great.

Respondent: [laughs] I think it was just an entertainment more than a film, really.

Interviewer: Can you remember any other films that stand out, or have you mentioned most of the ones that particularly enjoyed?

Respondent: Well ... I liked James Bond films in those days. Those two or three that I remember.

Interviewer: Mmm, you liked them because they were realistic, you said? More realistic than Bollywood?

Respondent: More realistic, yes.

Interviewer: And you liked Sean Connery?

Respondent: Yes, of course, of course. The way he spoke English, it comes to English again, he spoke real, Queen's English.

Interviewer: Mmm. What about horror films, did you ever watch horror films?

Respondent: Yes, we used to watch horror films. Frankenstein. But that was ... I used to watch more of those back home.

Interviewer: OK. In the fifties. I think there were some Hammer horror films in the sixties, weren't there?

Respondent: That's right.

Interviewer: Well, that's been really fascinating, thank you very much, really interesting stories, particularly, I'm particularly interested in the Indian Film Club at the Scala, because I didn't know about that.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: And I was wondering if there was anywhere that showed Bollywood films before mainstream cinemas did, so it's really interesting that there was a club that did that.

Respondent: That's right.

Interviewer: Ok, well thank you very much.

Respondent: That's OK.

