

## **Shaukat Ahmed and Mizra Rahman – Transcription**

*Audio quality – very good, intermittent background noise @ 15, 17, 24 mins -phone vibrating, phone answered, teacups clattering.*

**0:00:09**

**LMI:** Very good. Can you just give us your name?

1

**0:00:11**

**SA:** OK, my name is Shaukat Ahmed. I'm a retired engineer. I came to Bradford in 1974. And late '70s, early '80s, I used to get involved with a lot of mill workers and their well-being. Their work in the mills, representing them to the management, trying to organize them into unions and various things.

2

**0:00:36**

**LMI:** And tell us more about how you did that.

1

**0:00:38**

**SA:** Right. Mainly my loyalty was my community. I'm Bangladeshi. Bangladeshi workers were, in my assessment, the most helpless group of workers; least organized in the trade union sense, but they are very brotherly among themselves. Most of the Bengali workers worked in night shifts, and also they preferred working weekends because they could get paid time and a half. Their primary objective at that time was to earn as much money as possible, spend them at living expenses and send rest home for the extended family and their well-being. That was the main issue. For them, for me, what impressed me is that people who have never worked anywhere; they worked in fields, they come over and learn how to spin, how to card, become a jobber, looking at the machines, that discipline of working in a mill and the way they picked up the work. And Bengalis are very good workers, in the sense that they would work hard for their employment. There were problems that would be from misunderstanding, management not knowing enough of Bangladeshis. One would be...

2

**0:01:57**

**LMI:** Can I just stop you for a moment?

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**0:01:59**

**LMI:** Can you tell us what years we're talking about?

**SA:** I'm talking about '75 to '80, '82, '83. That's the period. Then the mills started declining.

**LMI:** So tell us about what it was like working with...

**SA:** Right. I was giving example to you see is that things like prayers, doing salah, which is doing your five times prayer, that time, getting time off to do that. Management... first was very reluctant because all the workers would leave the machines unattended and go out, go together to pray in congregation. But there's an easy solution to that. This congregation prayer is not compulsory. People can do it individually. So, when I spoke to the workers and spoke to the management and worked out that, yeah, you can, one by one, if you go and do your prayer, then other colleagues can look after the machine. And that problem was solved. A lot of people got warned, and got almost about to be sacked because of that, because their machines were jamming and their productivity was really low compared to the targets.

**LMI:** And was that in any particular mill or...?

**SA:** That was the one that happened in Ulkoma's in Fairweather Green.

**LMI:** Ulkoma's?

**SA:** Yeah. And then there was also in '71 there was that liberation war, so that there was tension between Bengali workers and Pakistani workers. And Indian Sikh workers were helping helping Bangladeshis in the war, India supporting us. So that spilled over in a lot of mills, in night shifts, things will boil up, tempers rise and then we fight. And then I'd be called in to interpret for the Bengalis and try to calm down, so that nobody loses job. I had a few incidents of that.

2

**0:03:59**

**LMI:** So was that a difficult time?

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**0:04:00**

**SA:** That was a difficult time. That was a difficult time.

2  
0:04:03

**LMI:** And how did that resolve itself in the end?

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0:04:05

**SA:** I think time is the big healer, and also management understood how to group workers together, so not doing something obviously that can put in a conflict. People would jam each other's machines just to make it awkward. So productivity goes down.

**LMI:** And they would sabotage?

**SA:** Yes. And workers are working for the money, and normally he is getting £12 a week, that week he gets only £10 because his productivity has come down. And those are issues would be big - £2 is big news because the cost of rent was £1. So...

**LMI:** What were the wages at that time?

**SA:** A good... a person who is doing a 12-hour shift, six days a week, would earn about £17-18.

**LMI:** £70-80?

**SA:** No, £17 or £18.

2  
0:04:59

**LMI:** £17 or £18.

1  
0:05:00

**SA:** In '70 to '74, '75. But that was also good big money. A house in Cornell Road would cost £500.

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0:05:10

**LMI:** To buy?

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0:05:11

**SA:** Yes. Now it's £150,000.

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**LM12:** Could you tell us again about filling out the forms?

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0:05:20

**SA:** All right. The other thing that was important for people to know - the workers, they could speak Bengali, but their literacy and numeracy was very poor. And their knowledge of English was almost non-existent.

Most... some of them learned English because at one stage in the mills they had English girlfriends. That's the way their English improved, their friendship built up, developed.

But the formal work thing, like filling in a form or filling in a sick note, before there was something called a fit note, that you have to give once you've [been to the doctors.], all this needs to be filled in by somebody. So they'd come to people like me who are college students, university students, or professionals like Mr. Rahman or Mr. Tanav, the school teachers, and ask them to do a favour, and we'd fill that in.

So every Sunday... I remember, my Sunday, Saturday duty was filling in forms for people as a favour. They come to my house. Then there are some welfare organizations set up who are then formally doing those sort of welfare rights work. So, every year they needed to fill in a form called Annual Income Tax Return form. Based on that, that is a tax suit big time. Once the form is sent back, they give you tax refund. You get the money back from the government. So there you need to put your name, your wife's name, your children's, date of birth, to get the code number. So, all the workers, because they're not educated, they carry a small book in their pocket, mainly black or red, and they'll have the history of their employment, their name, their national insurance number, the address that they lived in, their children's date of birth, their names, which mills they work from, which time to... which period to which period, interchange (if they change) employment in one year, two, three employments. So then they'll bring the form to me and give the book, and from the book, all the information, I'll fill that in, and ask them to sign. Then when they get cheque back, they'll be really happy they got some money back from the government.

2  
0:07:26

**LMI:** Oh. That's really interesting. So, who wrote the book? Did you write it?

**SA:** Yeah, yeah.

1

**0:07:30**

**SA:** When they changed the job, so "I've left Dan and Belvers and I'm working for Willscroft, can you fill this in?"

2

**0:07:37**

**LMI:** Oh right, so you did that all right through into the time when the mills started closing down? And what do you remember of that time?

1

**0:07:48**

**SA:** At that time, all the older people that they were bringing their families over and that was a big shock for them, they brought the family over and they lost their job. So it was really a big crisis time at that time, in their own confidence, in their own self-importance in the family. So, when you are earning the money, you are the boss. Our families are very patriarchal. Father is the boss. And suddenly the boss has become powerless. So, my analysis is that most of the people, who are elderly, they found mosque, religion, they should go to mosque and get their own satisfaction, spiritual satisfaction from. So, Tawakul-e- Mosque played a massive role in terms of defending our community, of giving our elders something to do, somewhere to belong to, once the mills are closed.

2

**0:08:43**

**LMI:** Was it very sudden? Did it happen very quickly?

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**0:08:46**

**SA:** It happened very rapidly at that moment.

2

**0:08:50**

**LMI:** And did that mean that people had much less money to spend?

1

**0:08:56**

**SA:** They had less money... not to spend, but to send home, maybe. Spending was enough here. But we are all looking... when we are earning in England, we are looking after extended families. You will be surprised, you will be looking after my brother, my brother's children, my sister's children, her sister's children. So, our support of the family is quite wide. The definition of family for Bengalis is much wider than father, mother, sister, brother, sister. We do uncles, aunties, even poor person in the village, if he writes me a letter saying that "I'm really stuck, my bull has died down, I can't plough my land." Then we chip in and send some money to buy a cow so he can plough his land.

**LMI:** That's really all we can do.

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**0:09:41**

**LM12:** Could you tell us again about the living situation?

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**0:09:45**

**SA:** Alright, the other thing that... because I came from a middle-class family in Bangladesh, (We are all from educated families in Bangladesh.) what struck me was, my uncle had his own house, that's not a problem, but most of the houses are lived in by single male adults. They are the demographic - no women; all young people from 18 to 26. They are the middle workers. They will share a house. There's a word for it in Bengali, 'bishu', but it's like 'mess'. You pool together your money. So, in some houses, people share the beds. So night shift worker will sleep there in the daytime, and same bed will be lived in by somebody else at night-time because night workers... So, in one of the houses, four bedrooms, there will be at least 10, 12 people living in there, 15 people living in that house, 10 by 10. So, they'll all have the living...all the houses will have rooms, and the basement will be the common kitchen, where there'll be a common stove. So tea is brewing, people are cooking. Everyone will have their own pots and pans. And they will cook there, and leave it there. And they will cook twice a week and eat throughout. The curry and rice is the main food. And they will share the beds, they pay money - say, I don't know, if it is so many shillings or... and then the landlord gets that.

2

**0:11:11**

**LMI:** So presumably that was temporary for them. They were, what, looking to save money to... ?

**SA:** Buy a house.

1  
**0:11:20**

**SA:** But their priority of buying a house in England was not a priority at that time. Their priority would be to buy land in Bangladesh. They all thought they were going to go back after five years...

**LMI:** And did they?

**SA:** ...and two or three years nobody went back.

**LMI:** Nobody went back?

**SA:** Nobody went back. But everybody, including me, I came to England, "I'll get a degree and will go back." I was in politics in Bangladesh. But mine was different because by the time I got my degree, Sheikh Mujib was killed, our leader was killed, and we are a hunted group, so you couldn't go back. I couldn't go back. I would be killed.

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**0:11:56**

**LMI:** All right, so you were almost like a refugee?

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**0:11:58**

**SA:** Refugee, yeah, but I say that. But all the other mill workers, they all thought we could go back. "Just to buy a few things and buy a bit of land and build my house, get married and go back. I'm not staying in this country, it's too cold, it's too dark." And they're still here. They're still there now.

2  
**0:12:16**

**LMI:** Can we go to you? Yeah. Sorry, now give me your name again. Can you say your name into the...

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0:12:24

**MR:** Mirza Rahman

2  
0:12:28

**LMI:** Mr Mirza, is that your first name?

**MR:** Yes

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0:12:33

**SA:** Mr Rahman

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0:12:34

**LMI:** You were a bank manager, that's quite impressive. Would you want to tell us where your bank was?

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0:12:44

**MR:** The bank was in Manningham Lane.

**LMI:** Yeah

1  
0:12:48

**MR:** We opened it in 1972 after Bangladesh was born.

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0:12:52

**LMI:** And did you open it?



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0:12:53

**LMI:** because you knew there were many young...

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0:12:56

**MR:** No, no, it's Bangladesh government.

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0:12:59

**LMI:** Bangladesh government?

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0:13:00

**MR:** Government.

7  
0:13:01

**LMI:** Oh, right.

2  
0:13:04

**LMI:** But there was a big Bangladesh community here already?

1  
0:13:08

**MR:** Yes, and surrounding Yorkshire, all over Yorkshire. They used to come to Bradford to send money for wedding.

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0:13:19

**LMI:** And so you looked after their money. And you sent it back to Bangladesh for them?

**MR:** Yes.

**LMI:** That must have been difficult in 1970s. How did you do that?

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**0:13:30**

**MR:** Through a system

17  
**0:13:31**

**MR:** The current bank was Natwest.

2  
**0:13:34**

**LMI:** Oh right, so you had another bank and you used to phone or send telex or something?  
So did you meet many mill workers when you were working?

**MR:** Most of my customers were mill workers or restaurant workers.

3  
**0:13:57**

**MR:** Restaurant owners and workers, restaurant owners.

2  
**0:14:04**

**LMI:** And did they come to you with their problems?

17  
**0:14:07**

**MR:** Sometimes.

2  
**0:14:09**

**LMI:** And what kind of things did they come to you about?

3  
**0:14:13**

**MR:** About their employment.

2  
**0:14:16**

**LMI:** Yeah.

3  
**0:14:17**

**MR:** And living.

2  
**0:14:20**

**LMI:** And did you have to give the support? The same kind of support helping fill in?

**MR:** Yes, used to fill their forms.

**LMI:** And did you go to them, or did they come to you?

**MR:** I used to go to them as well. I used to travel up to 100 miles. Up to Newcastle.

**LMI:** Oh right, to help people out? Wow. And that was just you helping someone, not part of your job?

16  
**0:14:50**

**MR:** No.

3  
**0:14:51**

**LMI:** No.

16  
**0:14:51**

**MR:** No. No.

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0:14:52

**LMI:** That's pretty good.

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0:14:54

**MR:** I used to travel all over the north.

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0:14:59

**LMI:** So, one of the things I'm really interested in is that sense of community that the mills created. You know, people were, and I think sometimes Bradford has forgotten that. People don't know why they live where they live because there's a sense of community. They belong somewhere. And I just wonder what you thought about people living in a community and working together.

3  
0:15:28

**MR:** You know in 1960s, as he said, people used to live together in one house, because all of them were single.

2  
0:15:42

**LMI:** So nearly all men at first?

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0:15:46

**MR:** Yes. All men.

2  
0:15:49

**LMI:** How was that? How did they get on?

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0:15:51

**SA:** I think they got on alright. Some of them had girlfriends and things like that. But they haven't brought their family over.

2  
0:16:01

**LMI:** And then they... and so then they and then they kind of slowly saved up enough to buy that? Did you help them get mortgages and that kind of thing?

3  
0:16:14

**MR:** Directly we did not give them mortgages, but we could arrange it for them.

2  
0:16:21

**LMI:** So you're kind of like a middleman.

**MR:** Yes.

**LMI:** A fixer. Yeah. I think you're both fixers in some way. It's really interesting this.

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0:16:30

**LMI2:** Did they come over on their own? Completely without knowing anybody else when they moved over here?

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0:16:37

**MR:** No, sometime they had a brother or a village person in this country. Through that link they came to Bradford.

1  
0:16:49

**SA:** That's a link, but the government rule was they issued some work vouchers at one stage, to bring workers over. So the...

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**0:16:58**

**LMI:** The British government?

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**0:16:59**

**SA:** No, Mills.

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**0:17:00**

**LMI:** Oh right.

1

**0:17:01**

**SA:** And British government accepted it. And that will be through that route. We are all from one part of Bangladesh because people are following each other.

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**0:17:09**

**LMI:** Yeah.

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**0:17:09**

**SA:** So I come over then.

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**0:17:11**

**LMI:** Which...

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0:17:11

**SA:** I bring my nephew over.

2  
0:17:12

**LMI:** Which part of Bangladesh was that?

**SA:** We are from Silhet. Mainly from Silhet.

**LMI:** That's right. We were talking to an Italian woman last week and she came from a tiny, tiny village in the south of Italy. Her mother did, and we said, "How did your mother know about this? Special Bradford work.?" She said "I've got no idea!"

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0:17:38

**LMI2:** With no internet, how does this communication happen?

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0:17:42

**SA:** Another thing I must add, there was a person called Mr Bell, a white man, living in Cornwall Road. He was such a philanthropic, good man. His job was to find Bengalis... His job was to find Bengalis jobs. Any new arrival, he'll take him with him and find him a job.

**LMI:** Mr Bell?

**SA:** Mr Bell. Everyone knew him. He was also an electrician. He had a tester in his pocket. He used to help everybody with anything at home. Lights not working, or power gone. Only thing he wanted was, he would eat with the family and other people.

2  
0:18:15

**LMI:** A plate of food.

1  
0:18:17

**SA:** I don't know what his background was. I just...

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**0:18:19**

**LMI:** How old was he?

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**0:18:22**

**SA:** 70 years old. And fantastic. Really good man, really somebody with golden heart. No racism in him, no discrimination. He'll go down... at that time mills used to work - they'd put up notice in the gate, workers one day he'll go round, because people can't read, so he'll take the newcomer and see which mill, and then talk to the management and get him a job and introduce him.

**LMI:** When you say there was no racism, did you was that I'm presuming there was racism at times?

**SA:** There was, yes.

2  
**0:18:53**

**LMI:** What was?

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**0:18:54**

**SA:** With the white workers... there was... a lot of mill disputes was black and white fight.

14  
**0:19:01**

**LMI:** Right.

2  
**0:19:02**

**LMI:** Did you have to deal with those?



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0:19:04

**SA:** I have done, dealt with one or two, yeah. Basically, it would be taunting, teasing people. Complaining about the food they eat from the kitchen window; when they open the kitchen and carry a curry smell. And that will be a big issue for some workers.

**LMI:** That's quite ironic, really, isn't it?

13  
0:19:20

**SA:** Now yeah, we have taken over the food now!

12  
0:19:22

**LMI:** It's Bradford's food, isn't it?!

2  
0:19:24

**SA:** They're keep

1  
0:19:26

**SA:** The person, he eat sitting down on the floor. So foreman going intentionally the status is fit to the on the plate, it's a personal thing, isn't it?

**LM12:** And when people were eating whilst at work, were they just sitting on the mill floors? Or was there a separate space?

**SA:** On the mill floor, they'll have a mat.

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0:19:36

**LM12:** So you just, you worked and ate within the...

**SA:** Also did the prayer in the same, we have a mat for doing prayer also.

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0:19:44

**LMI:** No canteen?

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0:19:46

**SA:** I don't know, old comers have a canteen, I remember.

1  
0:19:48

**SA:** Some mills will not have a canteen. They'll eat next to the machine. Nobody wants to lose productivity, no one wants to...

2  
0:20:04

**LMI:** No, exactly.

**LMI2:** No privacy either!

1  
0:20:05

**SA:** The thread gets tangled and you lose 45 minutes to get the tangle out, you're losing money.

2  
0:20:10

**LMI:** Twelve-hour shifts. That was... I think most young people today would go, "I'm not doing it!"

1  
0:20:17

**SA:** I'll give you another really important information. There's a mill called Barkerend Mills.

**LMI:** Oh, yeah yeah, I know it.

**SA:** Which is in the northern area. That, the night shift was all Bengalis. Even the Charger and Foreman are Bangladeshis. And they all joined the Labour Party. They all live in Manningham, so they all joined the Manningham Labour Party. So, Manningham Labour Party was controlled by Bangladeshis. Though it's a very Pakistani area. And the first councillor in Bradford...

**LMI:** Was Asian.

**SA:** Asian councillor in Bradford, was a Bangladeshi. Not a Pakistani. Because they are so well organised.

2

**0:20:53**

**LMI:** What was his name?

1

**0:20:54**

**SA:** Manowar Hussain. Mohamad Manowar Hussain.

**LMI:** When was that? About 1970...

**SA:** 1972. He was the only councillor who was Councillor, County Councillor and Alderman at the same time.

11

**0:21:09**

**LMI:** Oh wow.

1

**0:21:10**

**SA:** It was just after the Liberation War. All the white comrades were very supportive of Bangladesh.

**LMI:** Yeah yeah.

**SA:** And the militant, how do you call it, had a group of militant tendencies, militants? The left wing group?

10

**0:21:21**

**LMI:** I remember militants.

1

**0:21:22**

**SA:** They all suffered in Bangladesh. So, in a Labour Party meeting there were 120 people, but the Bengalis and Pakistanis are polarized. The white community, white members, from the university and left wing, they all supported Bangladeshis. So Hussein got the nomination and won the election.

**MR:** You know the new Kirkgate market?

**LMI:** Yeah.

**MR:** There is a plaque.

**SA:** He was the implementer. He did the opening.

**LMI:** You said the new Kirkgate market?

**SA:** Older.

**LMI:** They are going to pull it down, aren't they?

**SA:** They are going to pull it down now.

**MR:** The new one.

**LMI:** Yeah.

**MR:** They are pulling it down now.

**LMI:** Yeah. But there is a plaque in there?

2

**0:21:58**

**MR:** It's in the old Kirkgate market.

**LMI:** So, there's a plaque in the old one they put in the new one?

3

**0:22:04**

**MR:** No, no.

2  
0:22:04

**LMI:** No, they put it in the new one?

3  
0:22:06

**MR:** He is part of building this.

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0:22:09

**LMI:** Oh right, okay. I'll have to go and find it. I was there the other day.

9  
0:22:14

**MR:** On Westgate.

7  
0:22:15

**LMI:** Yeah.

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0:22:15

**MR:** Westgate Gate.

7  
0:22:16

**LMI:** Oh right.

2  
0:22:18

**LMI:** I'll have to go and look for it. I was there the other day and looking at some of the sculpture that's inside.

1  
0:22:23

**SA:** I can show you the photo of that.

6  
0:22:26

**SA:** I'm writing a book on Bangladeshis in Bradford.

1  
0:22:28

**LMI:** Are you?

**SA:** So I'm doing this.

**LMI:** Oh, how fantastic.

**SA:** But it's taking time.

**MR:** My wife was first Bangladeshi woman in Bradford.

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0:22:36

**LMI:** Oh really? Yes. Oh right. And what year was that?

6  
0:22:41

**MR:** 1962.

2  
0:22:42

**LMI:** She was the first woman from Bangladesh to come and live in Bradford?

**MR:** Yes.

**LMI:** I presume there have been lots of men before that?

**MR:** Yes.

**LMI:** Oh right and where did you live?

**MR:** First I used to live under Cliff Street in Bradford.

**LMI:** Undercliff? Oh, I remember.

**MR:** Yes, off Barker End Road.

**LMI:** Yeah, I know, I used to teach in Barker End Road.

1

**0:23:07**

**SA:** That's Mr. Manar Hussain, the first councillor. He's very dignified, very well spoken. And his wife was better spoken in English.

**LMI2:** Really?

**SA:** She was the treasurer of the branch.

3

**0:23:21**

**MR:** His wife used to be an English teacher in an English medium school in Bangladesh.

2

**0:23:27**

**LMI:** Oh right.

3

**0:23:28**

**MR:** His wife. And he was one of the governors of Bradford University.

2

**0:23:33**

**LMI:** Oh right.

3

**0:23:35**

**MR:** His wife.

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**0:23:36**

**LMI2:** And what did your wife do when she came over here?

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**0:23:40**

**LMI2:** Because she won't have had much of a community, being the first woman from Bangladesh.

3  
**0:23:46**

**MR:** She raised children, two children. Later on, when the children had grown up, she worked in the BRI.

2  
**0:23:55**

**LMI:** BRI, oh right.

3  
**0:23:57**

**MR:** In the maternity centre, with the midwife.

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**0:24:00**

**LMI:** Oh, right.

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**0:24:02**

**LMI2:** That must have been quite lonely, bringing up children without other women around.



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0:24:10

**LMI2:** That's a hard job.

2  
0:24:12

**MR:** But within a few years there was other women.

7  
0:24:16

**LMI:** Other women came.

2  
0:24:18

**LMI:** It must have been quite a change then over a few years?

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0:24:23

**MR:** After the liberation of Bangladesh, people started to bring their families.

**LMI:** Oh right.

1  
0:24:28

**SA:** Like I said, they were very reluctant to bring their families. "We're going to go back, we're going to go back." Because in 1974 there was a new Immigration Act and they gave a window of so many years. And we, the activists, felt that the door will be brought down. So we tried to convince the older people, "Bring your family over, this is the right time. If they're growing up with their father in Bangladesh, the chances of boys getting educated is non-existent." Blah blah blah. And we used to go around campaign, and ask them to - "Who'll fill in the forms for you and help you bring families over?" Because we realized that if... they can't bring their separate families. And I realized that they'll never go back. Because they're earning more money and... So, that... Like he was one of the pioneers because he brought his family over. His family. Mama's wife, Mama. He's brought his... My uncle, he had his wife

over. My uncle, his wife was... there was only... 11... in '71 11 families had their wives with them, and but we had about 13,000.

3  
0:25:36

**MR:** My sister came in 1963

1  
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**SA:** Sister and sister's husband.

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0:25:40

**LMI:** And was she already married?

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0:25:42

**MR:** Yes. She came with her husband He used to be a teacher here. He used to be a professor in Bangladesh, in a college, but here he was teaching.

6  
0:25:56

**LMI:** I think we can... This is great.

2  
0:25:58

**LMI:** This has been a great interview, really brilliant.

5  
0:26:05

**LM12:** A lot of stuff that we haven't heard about.

2  
0:26:08

**LMI:** We always wanted to hear more about communities, and communities forming and growing. And I think what you've told us, the story is here. I'm concerned that we haven't spoken to this man over here. I'm concerned that we haven't spoken to this man over here.

5

**0:26:21**

**LMI2:** I'm going to do it as a separate one just for anyone who's left to say.