

## **Ashtiaq Ahmed and Taslim Akhtar**

### **Notes of the interview for LMGM**

**10<sup>th</sup> of August 2023**

#### **Thornton Spinning, Spinner - two years**

I came to England in 1972 at age 14. Two years later, when I finished school I needed a job, so I walked up to the reception at Thornton Spinning on Thornton Road and asked for a job. They asked me to come on Monday. They gave me training for four weeks and I started working as a Spinner.

Most of the workers were Asian from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, they were rarely a black worker with us and only a few whites. Whatever happened on the political landscape on the subcontinent, here we all were united and supported each other. My colleagues knew it was my first job and encouraged me by saying hang in there, you will get the hang of it.

I found it strange as we were farmers back home and the trades people who were seen as a lower caste than farmers were the Kasvi – the weavers and now I was weaving. I didn't feel embarrassed though. A job was a job.

The shift started at 7am and finished at 4.30pm with 2 fifteen-minute breaks at 10am and 3pm and a half an hour lunch at midday. Everyone took lunch from home. I took whatever we had cooked, daal and roti etc. I found it terribly long days in the beginning, but did get use to it and later on I did seven-to-seven, twelve-hour shifts.

My first salary was £17. It felt a lot. When you have nothing, it was a lot.

#### **Ellingworth on Thornton Road, Spinner – two years**

I moved here as the salary was better, no other reason.

In Yorkshire the managers and supervisors treated Asian workers like third-class citizens, were incredibly rude to us and called us by shouting, Oi!

We were in need of work, so put up with their abuse. In Lancashire the attitude towards Asian workers was better than in Yorkshire. In Yorkshire they held such hatred towards us and didn't treat us as humans.

The other thing about Yorkshire was that if you were under twenty-five, they made you do a full workload, but gave you half the salary. In Lancashire they didn't, they gave you a full salary, so I moved to Lancashire.

#### **Dee Mill, Oldham, Rover – 5-6 years**

**1984 – Returned to Bradford. Saltaire Mill, Spinner – six months**

### **W J Whitehead, BD4 Spinner – one year**

I moved here as it was nearer to home, a better salary and also the machinery here was new. At Saltaire the machinery was from ancient times. This was the first job I started working night shifts. I had a family now and they spoke no English and were dependent on my to take them to appointments etc., so I worked at night and then if needed I sacrificed some of my sleep to take care of them.

### **Thomas Burnley, Cleckheaton, Winding – 4-5 years**

After this I went to Pakistan

### **1991 W J Whitehead, Winding, night shifts – 4 years**

1994 in January I had a stroke. It must have started the day before as the sight from one of my eyes went, but before I could pull over, it returned. That night at work I tried to use the knotter, but I just couldn't do it and asked my supervisor if I could leave. My colleagues were kind and said you've done a few hours, we'll help you and just get through the night, but I couldn't use my hand or arm. I haven't been able to work since.

I was never a member of a union until I worked in Lancashire as they stipulated that everyone is. I never used their services.

In the Lancashire Mills in summer they would bring in cold juice cans for the workers, in Yorkshire there was no such thing.

If there were any social events here in Yorkshire they may have been for those higher up, the workers were never party to anything.

When I look back at the years I worked in the mills I feel it was like a prisoners life, no living standard.

The good thing was that we earnt some money and our family was better off.

Photos are attached of him holding the tiffin that his father bought him to take his lunch in. He said, 'I'm not a photo person, even generally in life, but I have cherished this as my dad bought it for me. The one I had before this had a smaller box at the top and I couldn't fit much salan (curry) into it.'

### **Taslim Akhtar, wife of Ashtiaq Ahmed talking about her experience as the wife of a mill worker and then her own experience of working for Beachwear, a sewing factory in Bradford for two years**

I came to England in 1984 and he worked night shifts. I was so scared when he left for work at 8pm. It was pitch dark. For six months my nephew stayed the nights with us, until I got used to it.

At that time his salary was £65 a week. They got paid in cash and our mortgage was £50 a month. We really struggled with money and sometimes at the end of the week, we didn't even have a pound left.

One time that has never left me is when I had an antenatal clinic at BRI. It was Thursday during the day and he wouldn't be paid till Thursday night. The bus fare was 50p there and 50p back. I didn't even have a penny on me. I went to my elder sister's house on the pretence of visiting her, sat for a bit and then said to her I am going to my antenatal appointment, but have left my purse at home. Would you loan me £2 and I will give it back to you. She gave me a fiver and said, I don't have any

change, give it back to me whenever. That's how tough times could be for us in those days. We lived week by week and then I began working.

### **Beachwear Sewing Factory, seamstress – 2 years**

They gave me 2-4 weeks training and gave me £20 for that. We were paid piece rate and you earned £20-25, sometimes you earned £30-35 a week and that was the maximum. I worked 8-5 every day.

In the beginning I was terrified of the powerful machines. In Pakistan, we had manual sewing machines that were very slow. These machines were huge and once you put your foot down, they sped so much I thought they would go over my hands.

We sewed knickers, briefs, boxers and all kinds of swimwear. It was owned by an Asian Muslim man. He was a practising Muslim and though he didn't pay much, he was respectful and helped workers out when they needed it. There was also no pressure.

It was a mix team, the seamstresses were mainly women, but we did have permanent men on cutting the patterns and YTS often sent boys to work there too.

We all took roti from home for lunch. It was a nice atmosphere where we often laughed and joked. There was no union. We were a mix team of mainly Asian people.

Two events I remember. Once another lady who was my friend, Manjit didn't come to work on Monday. When we enquired they said she passed away on Sunday. I was in shock for weeks. How could that happen, she was the same age as me and perfectly healthy.

The second was a snow day. I had gone out naively in the morning in normal shoes. The weather was bad, but not terrible. On the way back the snow was up to our knees, the buses had stopped and I had to walk it home in those shoes. When reached the Leeds Road Gurdawara, my friend said, 'Taslim let's go in and at least warm our feet, we can barely move. I said to her, 'don't be silly, anyone seeing us come out will think we are Sikh women.' By the time I got home, my feet were numb.

Once I had my third child, I stopped working there and started working as a dinner lady so I could be there for my children. I now work as a cleaner. I have worked for thirty years now.