

Context and summary

This transcript is the record of an extensive interview with Mohammad Chowdhury, who was born in London to parents from Bangladesh. The interview covers Mohammad's life and education at Oxford, his thoughts on his own faith, much of his family's history and its intersection with the Bangladesh independence movement, and his parents' careers and activities—particularly his father's political organizing efforts.

Sadiya Ahmed:

It's 10:48am. Mohammad Chowdhury, so you're in Melbourne?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Correct.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Australia, and it's what, 9:48pm?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

That's correct, yes, it's 9:48 on a summer's evening that's got dark about a half an hour ago over here. We've got long days.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Rub it in, why don't you. Yeah, so this is actually our first, our first Zoom-recorded oral history interview for the Everyday Muslim heritage and archive project, let's see how it goes. We've had a few technical glitches, but there is a big time difference and, distance. So let's just go with it and see what happens. So let me start with asking your full name that you were given at birth.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Uh yes, Mohammad Tufel Chowdhury.

Sadiya Ahmed:

And, are there any other names that you're known by now?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

I'm generally known by Mohammad by my friends and colleagues, , Tufel in my family, and some people, a lot of people at work call me M.C., which has just become a bit of a, a bit of a name, but I'm generally just known as Mohammad to be honest.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Okay, can you tell me when you were born?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

1966, Sadiya, so that was 9th of October 1966.

Sadiya Ahmed:

And where were you born?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

London in, sort of City of London Hospital which was somewhere near Shoreditch.

Sadiya Ahmed:

OK, and can you tell me, what do you do, so, what's your line of work?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, I run my own strategy consulting firm called Longstreet Advisors, which focuses on working with mainly government, technology, and telecoms lines around the world in enabling digital technologies and digitization. So that's what I really focus on. And I work with clients in Australia, Asia, and in other parts of the world as well.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Can we, can I ask you a little bit about your parents' occupation? What did they do?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah sure, so my mum and dad, at a time, especially around the time when I was born, they were both working, so my dad, mainly in my adult life he was a businessman. He had a number of Indian or Bangladeshi restaurants in the UK, and also had a garments factory and some, some other business interests in Bangladesh. Earlier on in his career he did other things, I can tell you more about that, if you're interested, and then my mum, during most of our lives, was a mother, a stay-at-home mother, but she previously, did quite a bit of, she did quite a bit of charity work, worked for a charity in East London, and previously to that she worked in retail, actually, before I was born in London.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Okay, I would actually like to know a little bit more about your parents, anything that you can tell me especially about your father's businesses, that would be quite interesting to know.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, sure, so just stop me if I'm going too far back in history or too slow or anything like that. So, my dad, as I said I was born in '66, my dad came to the UK in '57 aged 22, with some, very little by way of resources when he came to the UK. He worked at British Rail in King's Cross Station for about eight or nine years, he did some other jobs on the side, and then he sort of saved up, sort of enough money to put money down to buy this restaurant in Lewisham, which was in southeast London. So he opened the restaurant in 1965, just a little bit before I was born.

Sadiya Ahmed:

What was it called?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

It was called the Curry Queen. It was a very typical, you know, sort of narrow and long restaurant on a high street and had this sort of wonderful glass front. And it had this sort of very, what you'd now call classic, you know sort of slightly felt type of wallpaper and flowery carpets, and really it would fit the stereotype of this Indian restaurant, if you like, from the old days. And it was, it was super successful. The restaurant was, the food was great, we had a very good chef, and it sort of catered to a population in that part of London that loved curry and our restaurant was one of the local favorites, so it was a very successful restaurant. And off the back of that, he opened another one, which was in Bedford just north of London. And then, a few years later, we actually opened a chain of four or five other restaurants, and they were in Surrey and Sussex, and they were, they were completely different. So they were, they were like much more catering to well-to-do rural population. Those restaurants were much more, much smaller in size, less seating, much more expensive menus and were also very successful. So then off the back of all of that, my father generated enough profits to start investing in Bangladesh, so when Bangladesh became independent in the very early 1970s, soon after that my father started going back to Bangladesh on regular trips and by about the late 70s, he'd invested in a few new businesses in Bangladesh including the garments industry, which was, Bangladesh is now the world's largest exporter of ready-made garments, just overtook China. And back then, my dad was one of the pioneers of the garments industry; he was one of the first people to open a garments factory in Bangladesh, which is now a \$30 billion industry. So yeah, so he was actually a real entrepreneur, and made, made his, sort of business activities scale up quite a lot from starting almost nothing, to be honest. My mother was, she came to the UK in 1961, also quite a young age. She was like, I think about 22 when she came here. And she was a medical student in [place name] in Bangladesh, or East Pakistan as it was then. She came to the UK for her own medical treatment because she was a little bit unwell, and then ended up sort of staying in the UK for a few years. And then my mum and my dad, who are also second cousins, got married in 1964, yeah, and then I was born in 66. And my mum did work in retail before I was born, and then soon after I was born, I think she'd stopped working by that stage. And then she started going back to work, working for a charity in East London. That was a lot

later, so that's probably when we were in secondary school, so that's probably in the, sort of early 1980ish probably went back to work.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Okay. I know from speaking with you before that you, that your father published a book. Can you tell me a little bit about the book and why he published it?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, I can do, yeah, in fact, I could pick it up—if you wanted me to, it's about three minutes away from me, I could go and get it and show it to you on the video. So, he writes a book called...let me just, let me just go and grab it.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Yes, please do.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, here we are. So I don't know if you can see that, I'll just put this—I'll just put the blur off, just give me a sec. ... How do I get the blur—I don't know how to get rid of the blur on—let me just get out of the picture and see if you can see that, no, you can't. Can you see that? No, it's too blurry. I don't know how to get rid of the blur on Zoom. Oh gosh, there must be a way of doing this, right?

Sadiya Ahmed:

Where it says, does it say 'Stop Video'?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Oh, no, no, I've got it. Okay, yeah, there's the book. It's called *Wage Earners: Working for a Better Bangladesh*. And my dad was M.A. Chowdhury. And the book was published in the, in the sort of 80—1990, it was published. And the reason why he wrote the book is because he spent a large part of his time working for a better environment for Bangladeshis who were, who were coming and settling in the UK. So he used to do quite a bit of work in the community, working with local MPs and also with community leaders. He used to be the general secretary of the Bangladesh Caterers' Association, which used to look after all of the restaurants—there were quite a few thousand in the UK. And so what he used to be doing a lot of was campaigning for essentially Bangladeshis who live and work in the UK, but would have a lot of difficulty, weirdly enough, going back to Bangladesh for trips or to, you know, buy a house or to send money to their family and stuff. There were all sorts of problems with sending money and going. So when we were kids, we'd always used to have to get visas to go to Bangladesh because we all had British passports. So, you know, the Bangladesh government didn't really pay much attention to UK citizens who were of Bangladeshi origin back then. Now they do, but back then they didn't. And it's quite ironic, because a lot of the

liberation war was funded by British expatriate Bangladeshis who raised hundreds of thousands of pounds or millions of pounds, which local Bangladeshis weren't able to do. So he used, so if you look at the chapters on this, I mean, you can sort of see that some of the chapter headings will tell you the sort of stuff he was talking about, which was things like how to improve the Bangladesh high commission in London, you know, how to improve Bangladesh demands, service— [unintelligible]—was the, was the airline, you know, what to do about currency exchange, you know, what to do about taxation, you know, what to do about visa issues, things like that. So it was a very practical sort of book. My father was not a formally university-educated man, I mean, he left school after the equivalent of his British, sort of, A-levels, it's called intermediate in Bangladesh. So the book was written as this sort of honest advice and perspectives of a migrant who had gone through a lot of problems and didn't want that to continue. It was a great, it was a great effort, and quite pioneering. There weren't that many migrants at the time who would, who would go to the effort of writing a book that would then obviously get into the hands of all sorts of policy-makers and people like that. So even though he didn't have the full university education, I think he sort of had the clarity of thinking and the mindset to engage with decision-makers, and that's something which I personally benefited a lot from, from observing my father doing, because I basically do that for a living now, you know, running a consultancy firm that advises on national, I advise on national strategies for digitization. Basically, I would say that the attitude of engaging power, people in power, and looking to change things is probably something I, you know, initially would have gotten inspiration from, from my father.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Absolutely. It was definitely very forward-thinking. Was he part of the liberation movement that was happening in—

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah.

Sadiya Ahmed:

—in the [unintelligible] at the time? What was his role?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Very involved, yeah, very involved. So, you'll actually see that the book—the, so, firstly he was the convener of all of the UK fundraising that was done for the liberation effort in 1971. So, I still remember going to Trafalgar Square, aged four—it's one of my earliest memories—on a massive sort of march that ended in Trafalgar Square. And he was instrumental in all of the fundraising that happened in the UK. And in fact, when he died in 1991, he was decorated by the Bangladeshi government after his death. He was awarded, like, a national medal in the—about two to three years after his death, posthumously. And then we also had a very strong connection to the

liberation world because of my great-uncle who, in fact, this book of my father's is dedicated to his memory, General Osmany. General Osmany was the leader of the Bangladesh liberation forces, so he was the commander-in-chief of the freedom fighters, and then after Bangladesh became independent, he was the first minister of defense, the minister of civil aviation in Bangladesh. So he was my great-uncle, and so my mother grew up in his house in [place name] in Bangladesh, and my father was very close to him. And so, not only was my father involved in fundraising for the effort, but we had a direct family connection to the leader of the liberation struggle. And he was someone that I personally took lots of inspiration from, I was extremely close to him myself until his death. Yeah, so we were deeply involved—I say we were a family that was deeply involved in liberation. And—

Sadiya Ahmed:

And where did you—

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Suffered a lot as well. So, my father's village in [place name] in northeast Bangladesh, most of the people who lived in his village were killed in 1971 because of the genocide that was happening. So hundreds of people from his village that he came from were literally murdered in 1971.

Sadiya Ahmed:

I was going to ask you about, where did the community convene to have these meetings? Was there a—did each area kind of have their own place, or did the community from different parts of the country get together? How were the efforts organized?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

That's a, yeah, it's a great question. So, I think that I may not be able to justice to it because I was probably a bit too young to remember it all directly, but I—even up to the age of, you know, when I was even twenty, you know, my dad was still doing a lot of stuff in the community and I was, you know, sometimes I would go with him to meetings. So what I would say is that there were definitely different ecosystems of communities in different parts of the UK. Like, there was definitely an ecosystem in London that was quite distinct from the ecosystem in Birmingham, and then in Manchester and so on and so forth. So the one in London, until that sort of 1980s period, was very much centered around Brick Lane in East London. So as you might be aware, Brick Lane in East London is, has still got a very sort of strong concentration of Bangladeshi-origin population. Even back then, Brick Lane was a little bit of a magnet for community meetings about Bangladesh. So I still remember going to Brick Lane with my dad, you know, in the 1980s when I was, like, in my teenage years, doing things like—I remember once we went to a meeting which was held at Brick Lane Mosque, which was to raise funds to convert the gravel road that went from the truck road to my dad's village, so it was like four kilometers which was all gravel and mud, and I remember there

was a fundraising meeting to tarmac the road. And they needed something like £20,000 equivalent or something like that to, to do the tarmac. And I remember they raised about £40,000 in about two hours and had all this money, and then they got, they got the tarmac done, they got the brick done. And I've driven along that tarmac road more recently—still there so, so there were all those sorts of activities that would happen. And it's tremendous how these seemingly lower, low-middle-class Bangladeshi migrants who, you know, you wouldn't really think they were that well off, they, they'd rock up at a meeting and they'd all shell out £1,000, £2,000 each as a commitment, as a pledge. And then the money would get raised. So—

Sadiya Ahmed:

Back in the 80s that was a lot of money.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

That was a lot of money. I still remember [unintelligible] think it was something like 20,000 which I guess in today's money might be sort of, I don't know, three or four times that amount. Yeah, yeah, it was a lot of money back then. Yeah, I think if you got the right issue, and it meant something to people, I think they would get the money out, to be honest with you. You know, it would happen. So I think a lot of the central gravity was around Brick Lane back then. We used to live in southeast London near Lewisham, where the restaurant was. There, I mean there—whilst there were quite a few Bangladeshis living in all of these areas, there wasn't, like, that much of a critical mass to, to bring people together to have big meetings of that sort. Obviously you would have meetings in people's houses and stuff, but not quite at that scale.

Sadiya Ahmed:

And do you remember any, sort of, names of the people that were part of the—of these, of these meetings—people who would have been part of the [unintelligible]

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, I can actually remember one or two names and I could, could find out other names. I mean, the most memorable person was a gentleman called [name]. [name] was, like, a very significant person in the Bangladeshi community during my childhood. So, he's passed away now, I think he was probably ten years older than my father, so he would have been born in the 1920s. He was a convener of all sorts of Bangladeshi gatherings, a fierce nationalist, a really nice man, a very gentle sort of person, and a real leader in the community. So he was, for example, very strongly aligned with people like Peter Shaw, MP. So Peter Shaw was the Labour MP of Bethnal Green during the, sort of, 70s and 80s. So in the sort of Harold Wilson, Michael Foot, you know, Labour governments, Peter Shaw was a prominent MP. So [name] would do a lot of work with him. [name] was a very well-studied person, I can't remember what his profession was but he was a very well-studied, educated person, and he was a great leader. Another person I can remember was a councilor in his later

years. So [name] was based in, more in, more towards the west. So he would be Lisson Grove, that sort of area. He was a councilor from there. He was the first Bangladeshi to enter formal politics in the UK from all I can remember. So I think he was the first person of Bangladeshi origin to be voted in as a councilor in the UK, and at that time, there were no Bangladeshi-origin MPs or people in the House of Lords. So he was pretty much the first Bangladeshi-origin person to be in formal politics, I would say. He was a distant uncle of mine, and another amazing leader, significantly involved in fundraising for the liberation war, deeply, deeply sort of loyal to his community, and a great leader. You know, and he died not that long ago, probably, maybe seven or eight years ago was when he passed. So I can remember those two; there were clearly many, many others, I just don't remember all of the names. But those two were, you know, very significant people. [name]'s son, whose name is Murad [name], was also a councilor and was then a member of the London Assembly as well, an MLA. I don't know if he's still a member of the London Assembly, but he was for a number of years, right up to the point when Boris Johnson was Mayor of London, he was a member of the London Assembly—he's my cousin. I'm not sure what he's doing right now, but yeah. So the sort of tradition continued in the family. In fact, my father was extremely keen for me to enter UK politics, which, if you were to say do I have any regrets in life, I've got few, that would be one of them, right, which is that I didn't take the opportunity to get into politics, because, you know, I think it could've, could've been a nice way to try to have made a bit more of a difference. But he was pretty keen for me to get involved, which is why he used to take me to those [name] and Peter Shaw meetings and whatnot. And because I was lucky enough to study at Oxford, and I was one of the first British-born Bangladeshis to go to Oxford, and I did politics and philosophy and economics, I had the right sort of credentials and background to, you know, make my way in politics. He was really keen. But then he, my father died a year after I finished my master's degree. So I did my master's at Cambridge, I did an MPhil in economics at Cambridge straight after Oxford. And then a year later, my father was dead. And, you know, he was very encouraging of me to get into politics. And I just, I just never really followed it up. Think he was the sort of person—

Sadiya Ahmed:

Was there a re—

Mohammad Chowdhury:

—that wanted change in the society, wanted change in the community. Sorry you were going to say?

Sadiya Ahmed:

Yeah, I was going to say, was there a reason why you didn't go down that path?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, I mean, to be honest with you, I think back at the time, I was, I was sort of quite interested in working internationally, and I was quite interested in working in developing countries. So, you know, after I finished my master's in economics at Cambridge, I joined a consultancy firm in the UK, the firm that's now called PWC. So I joined that firm as a graduate, and I got the opportunity to start working in the Middle East, and in the former Soviet Republics, and a little bit in eastern Europe, and I really, really enjoyed that work. And I've continued working in those sorts of geographies throughout a lot of my career. So I think I was really driven by that, and I felt like I really wanted to build a career like that. My father never really wanted me to go into the family restaurant business. In fact he sold the business just before he died, he had sold it. And politics, I just never really took it seriously, to be honest with you. I don't think I ever really looked at it as a career, do you know what I mean? Like, I don't think I ever saw it as a career. When I look, when I look at it now, I feel like yeah, you know, one could probably achieve quite a lot in politics, but back then I never really saw it as a career. I was offered a councilorship option a few years after my father's death, they contacted me and offered me a seat, but I just declined. I just was sort of, I'm not, I'm not that keen. As it happened in the last fifteen years, I've done loads of work with politicians, because I've, I've done lots of work advising at the cabinet level in various countries around the world, and I can see how effective politicians can make a difference. I can also see how difficult it is to be an effective politician, but I can see how they can make a difference. So, yeah, so there's a side of me that sort of goes, yeah, you know, maybe, maybe that could have been an option one day. And my kids, even, even though I'm like, I've been a senior partner in a big consulting firm, and I run my own business now, and I've worked in all sorts of weird and wonderful places, my kids always bringing me down to earth and sort of going "Dad, you're a failure because you didn't—you never became prime minister of your country." I go, thanks very much, you know, that's great.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Oh gosh. I was going to ask, well, it sounds like you've, you've been making some changes in a, in a different way from the work that you're doing. I just wanted to go back a little bit to the liberation of Bangladesh in 71, 72. Do you remember that time? Do you remember what the atmosphere was with the community, what you did? Was there a celebration? Just tell me a little bit about that time.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, absolutely, so I do remember that time. And it's—I was four when the liberation war began. And I remember it well, because there was a great deal of fear and worry about, about it, because we all had family members that were seriously affected by the war, and all we'd do is just hear stories back in London about what was going on. And with communications not being so immediate back then, the stories would come dripping through on telegrams or through people that were able to get out from time to time. And they would always be incomplete, and we would

be in huge worry about all of our relatives over there, because we would never know who was safe. You know, I remember one of my cousins—his father, so my uncle, basically, was killed by the army in [place name], by the Pakistan army in [place name]. So he was like an electrical engineer, and he was, he was at the site of a power line that had gone down during fighting, and he was at the power line trying, trying to direct the technicians to fix the power line, and the army found him and shot him. So he was dead, so those cousins of mine—I've grown up with those cousins. So there were, there were all sorts of things like that that we, we used to keep hearing the stories about, which was pretty shocking, to be honest. Stories of other cousins of mine who were so scared of the army raiding all the villages that—my cousins still tell me this story now, it's about the same age as me—that they used to hide under the bed in the bedroom in the village in, in [place name] and they would literally see the, the Pakistan army—the soldiers' boots, like, walking past through the house. And they wouldn't see them hiding under the bed and then walk out. And they were obviously—I mean he was like what, he's a bit older, he was like six years old back then. A lot of stories like that. Some stories of great bravery as well—like, my father's brother once spent a few hours hiding with my great-uncle, General Osmany, hiding in a sort of cesspool of water where the army was going by, and they were just sort of under the water and just sort of breathing somehow for a few hours and then they came back out of the water again. Stuff like that. But, you know, I'd say that I could, I could show you something very historic, again if you gave me fifteen seconds, I could go and grab something which—can you allow fifteen seconds? You can edit this a little, right? Just give me a few seconds.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Oh yeah, absolutely.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, thank you. So I'm going to show you something which is probably a museum piece, so this is a t-shirt—so I'm, I'm just going to open it up, just going to, I'll just open up this t-shirt—the t-shirt says "HELP BANGLADESH", right? So this t-shirt is from Trafalgar Square in 1971. So I've just kept it, I've just never—I've always preserved it. I, I never wear it because I don't want to, like, damage it. So I haven't worn this even once in the last fifteen or twenty years, I don't think. It's faded at the back, so the back's, the back's all fa—I don't even get the color, the back's all yellowy. The front's still a bit white. So that t-shirt, I still remember there was a whole sale of these t-shirts in Trafalgar Square, and obviously the—all the money was going towards fundraising. So, yeah, that's like, I don't know, that's 53 years old, that t-shirt. And, you know, that's another memory of mine from that time. And, I guess after Bangladesh became independent, the first time we went was 1974. So that was probably about three years after independence is, was when, the first time we made a trip there as a family. I still remember that trip. So we, we went on hajj, so I was about six and a, six and a half, nearly seven years—I was about seven, I was about seven. So we went from London to Mecca, and we did Hajj. I remember Hajj was, was early in the year, it was like about January, or

that sort of time of the year. We did Hajj, and then from Hajj we went to Bangladesh, and I still remember that trip to Bangladesh. So Bangladesh then was three years after independence, very fresh, very new. My great-uncle was a minister, so he was, he was—you know, we, we used to go and visit him and that was—we could see all the things that he was doing. But the country was in a pathetic state, I mean, you know that the—a lot of the assets had been destroyed. I think the airline had, I think, two aircraft at the time because the army, when they were leaving after defeat, bombed all the aircraft that were left on the landing strip, so there was nothing left behind. I mean it was just, it was terrible. There was massive poverty, you know. I still remember that—I think the average age, life expectancy for a rickshaw driver was, like, 28 or something, you know? It was just, like, terrible. There was massive malnutrition, you know, food was being imported but there was a lack of foreign currency. There was all that sort of stuff. I still remember a lot of that, also because people like my dad were very involved and we—they'd talk about that sort of stuff a lot, so I, I guess I just picked it up through the conversations. And you know what, I mean I'm sort of drifting a bit now in the conversation so just stop me if you want to, but I think those early years of dealing with the pathetic situation of my home country instilled in me a sense of a) despair, b) probably a bit of anger, if you like—I don't think the anger was against what had happened in 1971, not for me, because I wasn't personally affected by it, although I'd heard so many stories, but the anger was more like the injustice of poverty, if you like, right, and—because it was in your face in such a big way. And then we come back to England, and of course England was prosperous and stable and, you know, all that sort of thing, I mean—the contrast in life between that sort of stable, quite well-to-do life in London and, you know, by the early 70s, you know, we had our own, we had our own detached house; we had two cars; I used to go to private school. And then—and then the sort of abject poverty and despair in Bangladesh, I mean the, the contrast between these two was so startling, I think that really, that really affected me, to be honest. And that's probably why I work in digital technologies today, it's because I want to—I believe in, in change that can enable, you know, a lot more people to get access to a, to a lot more goods and services than, than before. So that had a massive impact on my outlook in life, to be honest. It was shaped by that environment, by that time, but also, I'd say, influenced and shaped by my own parents—the, the way they worked through these crises. My mum and my dad, I can tell you, I, I never heard them say negative things about what was happening in the war, or anger, or—it was more about stoic determination to try and, like—okay, how can we solve this, how can we solve this? That was really what consumed them. I think I learned a lot from that as well, actually.

Sadiya Ahmed:

So, as a child, how did you navigate this, all of this, happening in the background, in school and in, sort of, outside of the home? How did, how did that work?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, very challenging—good question—very challenging, I would say. Because, you know, we were experiencing all of this and we were aware of all of this happening, yet when you get to school, of course it's a different world. I mean, the world at school is completely oblivious of what's happening in Bangladesh, which is a country halfway around the other side of the world, you know, not necessarily in people's mind's eye as to, as to what's happening. And it's not necessarily the case that my teachers or my friends at school had much idea of what was happening. So, so it was a very, it was, it was a contrast, I would say. And we did have almost split lives, you know, when you get—when you come home, I mean, life for me was Bengali. You know, we, we would eat Bengali food, you know, we, we would speak Bangla at home. But when I'm at school, I'm, I'm, it's completely different, you know. I'm, I'm in, I'm speaking English, I'm interacting with friends, none of whom are Bengali, you know, they're, they're all mainly English or, or from other country origins, mainly English. So completely different lives, if you like, and I was, I was comfortable in each life, but I guess there was a bit of a, a translation needed, you know as, as you come home from school, and as you get into school in the morning—a bit of a translation needed. It wasn't like continuous cultural—culturally, culturally same journey, right? So there was that. In terms of the Bangladesh war, I mean, you know, soon after the war was over—it's not as though—I would be, I wouldn't be wanting to say that what was happening in Bangladesh was affecting my, my mindset on a daily basis—that wouldn't be right, to say that. It definitely affected me, and I was aware of it, and when I would see it, it would, it would affect me and impact me a lot. But it's not as though I'd go to school every day thinking about the Bangladesh war or situation back home either, so it was more like, I think, just dealing with, you know, the, the stark difference between effectively having two types of identities, you know—I think that was probably more what, what it was about. Yeah, I still remember the day back in 71, probably about November, I reckon, when my uncle—that was my dad's, another one of my dad's younger brothers who's now—now lives in Bromley, Kent and he's now 82 years old. I remember the day he walked into our house in 1971, he'd escaped from East Pakistan and gotten himself out, and had managed to somehow, over the course of about a week's journey, got himself to London as a refugee, and then my dad went and picked him up from the airport and brought him home. And I still remember that day when he walked in—quite emotional, actually. But yeah, I mean, you know, that was, that was the life back then—it was really just about, about keeping, keeping both sides of the life up at the same time.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Tell me about your childhood outside of that. What did you most enjoy about being a child?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Oh yeah, wonderful childhood. Gosh, I mean, riding my bike, I mean, you know, going on massively long bike rides, you know, the long, you know, going further and further each time. You know, by the time I was, I was thirteen, I was probably cycling three to four miles away from home and back.

And by the time I was sixteen, it was probably like ten miles. And you know, cycling around was great, cycling around with my friends—wide variety of friends from all sorts of nationalities, no real boundaries, cultural boundaries. Playing a lot with my cousins—so the cousins that I mentioned who lost their father who was repairing the electricity pole, they ultimately migrated to the UK, we were all about the same age. And so playing with them, that was a massive thing, we used to play together a lot. Lot of cricket—massive cricket fan, still am, lot of cricket, what else? School, took school quite seriously, to be honest, I mean, did work quite hard at school. Always struggled at school in my first few years, I only started doing slightly better when I was probably two to three years away from O-levels, before that I was just sort of plodding along, but, you know, worked hard at school—

Sadiya Ahmed:

[unintelligible]

Mohammad Chowdhury:

—Say again?

Sadiya Ahmed:

What are the names of the schools that you went to?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Oh yeah, my first sort of junior school, primary school, was a place called Riverston, which is on Sidcup Road in, in Eltham, London SE9, and then—or London SE12, my mistake. And then secondary school, I went to St. Dunstan's College, which is in Catford, London SE6. So that took me all the way through to finishing my A-levels before I went to university. And yeah, school was also, you know, sports—school—I used to do cricket, judo, rugby in the winter, which I didn't really enjoy. I was crap at sports. I was okay at cricket, not bad at cricket, but I was pretty much crap at everything else. I did two years of military training, sort of combined cadet force, which I ended up being quite good at, weirdly enough. And then school trips overseas, occasionally. So every year we'd have at least one French trip, and possibly a slightly longer trip somewhere. We'd have school camps every now and then in, in England, some of which were good fun, some of which were pretty awful, but yeah, lots of school activities. Really good friends—so I had three or four really close friends and actually, two of them are still really close friends of mine today, so it's sort of 45 years later, we're still really close friends. In fact, I'm seeing one of them for dinner one week from today in Paris. We're going to meet up for dinner, because I'm, I'm flying to Europe in a couple days time, and I'm going to meet him in Paris for dinner. So, some really, really strong friendships, and cross-cultural friendships. You know, I mean, we were a little bit unlike some of our family—extended family—in England, which, whereby, we—me—I had friends from all faiths and backgrounds. Some of my relatives, or some of my community, didn't necessarily mix that much outside the community, but I had friends from all different backgrounds and still, still do.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Can you tell me a little bit about what influenced your choice of subjects and your chosen career path?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, sure, so, so, the other thing I was really interested in as a kid was cars—I'm, I'm a complete car fanatic, I'm kind of a total gearhead, as they say, still am. And so, I was actually—my career goal was to be a car designer. That was the thing that I was really keen on doing. So I was going to apply to do aeronautical engineering, which was the, the course that was, like, back then, suitable for going into car design later on. So, I was going to apply for aeronautical engineering at Southampton University, I still remember going there for an open day. But then, when I saw what engineers do at university, which is basically do lots of lab work and all that, I somehow—it's, it didn't link with my whole vision of being some sort of dude, car designer, probably living in Milan, right? And, and of course, I'd completely omitted the fact that you don't just become a car designer who lives in Milan; you have to go through all of these hard yards of qualifying and learning. And of course, I just wasn't up for it, I just wasn't interested in that. So I made a snap decision, which was that—I'm not going to be a car designer anymore, I'm actually going to do economics. So I decided to do economics instead. That's what really influenced my sort of direction of going towards economics. And then, when it came to applying to university, I was absolutely determined I wanted to go to Oxford or Cambridge, and I got fixated by it, to be honest. Some of my best mates had got into Oxford, and I was—I think that was a big, big draw for me to really do the same. And so, Oxford didn't offer economics, it only offered what's called politics, philosophy, and economics. Cambridge offered economics straight, but I was, I was more interested in going to Oxford. So that's why I applied to do politics, philosophy, and economics. That was what drew me towards that decision for a degree.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Did you have any regrets about that or did you enjoy your course?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

No, no regrets at all. So, I, I went in not having really studied politics or philosophy before—I'd done economics for A-levels—but absolutely loved politics and philosophy, to be honest. I'm, I just loved the liberation of being able to think about anything you like, and to be able to argue, use logic, have moral arguments—I really loved it. And probably because I'd had that childhood being exposed to politics, you know, through my dad and then through my great-uncle. I think that probably had its influence on me by that stage as well. So I really gottten, gotten into it—got into it, I mean. I didn't know how to write essays, because I'd never really been taught at school how to do any of that stuff, so I struggled in my first year at Oxford. I failed my philosophy—what's called

prelims, which is your first-year exams—had to retake them. So I was actually really scared that I was going to fail again and then get thrown out. But anyway, I managed to get through fine, and second and third years I just had a ball. I really, really enjoyed what I was studying—didn't study that hard, to be honest. I studied, you know, quite hard for my final exams, but in my second year, I didn't really study much at all. I spent a lot more time doing extracurricular activities, mainly Oxford Majlis. So Oxford Majlis was the South Asian society for undergraduates—very famous, founded in 1905 by Indian students who wanted decolonization of British India, led by various prominent later politicians. So Indira Gandhi, who was the Prime Minister of India in the 1970s, was the president of the Majlis in the 1960s, I think, early 60s, when she was there. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was the president of the Majlis, who was the father of Benazir Bhutto, who was the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

[Unknown name] was, and a few other people—a few other really famous political leaders. And I got, I got really involved in Majlis, and I became president of the Majlis myself in 1988, and then I was responsible for running this organization which was—had three or four hundred members, and we used to run two speaker events every week. And so we would have people—ambassadors, we would have politicians, academics, and so on. I met some really interesting people during that period of time—some people who are still prominent and active in politics even now. And, you know, I, I put all my focus into the Majlis, I didn't really study that hard at all, to be honest. But I, but I enjoyed my, my studies.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Why was the Majlis so important?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, that's a good question. So, I think I wasn't—I think it was all about finding myself, to be honest. So, I reckon that by the time, by the time I went to Oxford, I probably thought I was, I was—I knew who I was. But I realized when I got there that I, I didn't really know who I was, because, you know, I was, I was—I was a fairly, you know, a responsible sort of responsibly practicing Muslim, you know? But when I went to Oxford, because I was surrounded by libertarian sort of way of life and, you know, students who, you know, who were, have all been let free from their homes and they were doing whatever they wanted, you know, I really struggled because I was, like, trying to stick to this regime of being a Muslim, right? Yet, I was surrounded by people who weren't interested in any particular structure of life or faith, and I found myself sort of interacting with them in a way that I was trying to almost make a point about the fact that I was a Muslim, right? Doing it in a way that I probably wouldn't do at all today, but back then, I, I wasn't comfortable in who I was—I was doing what I was doing, but I wasn't necessarily—hadn't yet matured enough to be comfortable in it, so I had to make a point of it all the time. And then I found out that I, I knew, even though I've just been talking about the Bangladesh liberation war and this and that, I found that I really didn't know much about where I came from, you know, I didn't know much about the history of the Indian subcontinent. I didn't know anything about British colonialism,

for example. I didn't know much about how India was, was partitioned; I didn't know much about how Pakistan was set up or how Bangladesh got created. From a, from a political perspective, I didn't really understand much about it until I went to Oxford and studied it. So I think I was really learning a lot about stuff that was really relevant to my own identity. And Majlis, I think, what magnetized me into that, because I realized—because when I first used to see the Majlis meetings, I would be—I would be embarrassed, because I would sort of think, right, they're going to talk about the Kashmir issue, or they're going to talk about the Naxalites, which was some left-wing sort of movement in India, or they're going to talk about the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. And I would just sort of think, I don't know what's going on in these places, I've got no idea, right? And I felt embarrassed. But over the course of time, over a year or so, I really started becoming a bit more familiar with all of this, and I think I was a bit in awe of some of the, the students who were the slightly more older students at the Majlis when I first joined it, but by the time I'd been doing it for a year or so, I became more confident in myself and, and so I think I really got magnetized into Majlis because of that. And yeah, if you'll allow me another minute, I could probably pull out a couple of Majlis term cards and show you them, if that's useful for your video.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Yeah.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Just give me a minute. See if I can find one, I think I have got a couple somewhere. ... I do have them but I can't—I just can't find them. ... It's a terrible shame, I wish I'd thought about it beforehand, I can't find them. If I do locate them—they're literally around here somewhere—I'll, I'll send you a few screenshots if you want. They're, they're really interesting, they're, they're 35-year-old term cards with, you know—which will tell you about all these great speakers who were coming, all from the Indian subcontinent, you know, some really famous people, actually. So yeah, I'll, I'll try and track it down. So it was really, a really—

Sadiya Ahmed:

Do you have any—

Mohammad Chowdhury:

—privilege. Yeah, go on.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Was going to ask if there were any publications that were related to the Majlis—did they have their own publications or anything similar to that?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

They've got a—they've still got a website, and the history of the Majlis is available there. Something-somebody's written a history of the Majlis, I think. The Majlis can claim credit for a lot of the lobbying that was done about British decolonization of India in the 1930s and 40s. The Majlis also goes through ebbs and flows, so it's always had a decade when it's been really active and there's a decade when it's been quiet and then vice versa again. It goes through ebbs and flows. It is—it's a very storied institution. It's, it's very well—very well known amongst those people who've been in that sort of community. Yeah, I don't know about any other publications as such, yeah, but the Oxford Majlis was really something of an institution—like a major institution.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Majlis may have—Majlis may have answered part of this question, but in what ways do you feel that Oxford supported or accommodated your cultural and religious practices, if at all?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

I don't—I mean, I think the university as a whole was ambivalent to your faith. I, I mean, I don't think—I think the university was inclusive and, and open-minded. I don't, I don't think there was any restrictions or, you know, influencing towards the practice of your faith, to be honest. But my time at Oxford was characterized by, you know, some challenges around faith, to, to be honest. I mean partly, I'd say, personal challenges, which is that I struggled with—I never struggled with my belief, but I struggled with practice, and, and regularity of practice, you know, when it comes to things like praying, like, five times a day. I mean, during my Oxford years, I'd say that my praying was diminished to, you know, twice a day or something. Like, really, really diminished in my own—in my own mind. But then, so there was personal struggles, if you like, with, with discipline and so on. There was a lot of challenging of faith by other students, sort of saying why do you believe in this, why do you do that, you know, why do you, why do you fast thirty days a year, and things like that. Which, of course, one would expect when you go to a university because you're surrounded by clever and curious people, and they ask all sorts of questions, right? So that was actually probably a good thing, not a bad thing, but at the time, I saw it as an attack because I wasn't mature enough to deal with it, so I saw it as a, as an attack and I got really defensive about it. Which was probably not the right reaction, but it was the best I could manage at the time, so there was that. Which I would say, funnily enough, probably strengthened my faith in the long term rather than weakened it, because it sort of made me think about it harder, which was a good thing. There was the odd racist incident, I would say—I can remember two. One was, we held a Majlis—end of term dinner at a college in Oxford. I won't name the college. And, you know, we sort of served biryani and kebabs and things like that; it was a very successful dinner. And then, the next day, we got a letter from the warden of the college saying that, you know, the staff had complained of curry smells in the hall, right? Which I thought was racist, and I wrote back to him expressing that feeling, and then they sort of withdrew their complaint. And then I was once called a "mad mullah" by somebody in my

college who shouted it out from a window as I was walking through like a quad, like a garden area in the college, and I was furious about that. That was round about the time *The Satanic Verses* was published by Salman Rushdie, if you remember that.

Sadiya Ahmed:

I was about to ask, wasn't it related to any particular incident?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, it was related to that, so it was related to that. Because when the Salman Rushdie book was published, he came to Oxford to do a reading at Blackwell's on High Street—on Broad Street. And I attended the reading, and actually had a bit of a conversation with him. But then I wrote a letter to the Times which was published, which sort of said something along the lines of the, the book—we should respect the freedom of speech of the writer, however, the book has damaged the self-respect of many people in the Muslim community and, and, you know, that shouldn't be allowed, right? So that got published in the Times, and I got a lot of racist sort of hate mail for that because they published my college address, and I received probably about twenty letters in the post, fifteen of which were pretty racist and five of which were like, thank you for writing your letter. So that was quite upsetting, and then, I got called the "mad mullah" in the college garden. Anyway, so I, I then went and tried to find out who it was, because I was pretty angry about it. Couldn't really figure it out—I, I knew which room it had come from, but there were four or five students in the room and nobody would admit who did it. And then I went and complained to the principal. And the principal was a constitutional lawyer, and she had written the Zimbabwe constitution and she was, like, this sort of big authority in constitutional law. And so she took it really seriously, she took it as an infringement of someone's human rights, and she undertook an investigation in the college and she found—they found out who did it. And they got them to come and apologize, and that was the last I heard of it.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Wow.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

And, yeah, I never really, I never really tolerated racism, to be honest with you. Didn't tolerate it, to be honest. So that was the only difficult experiences, the rest of it was great, I mean, you know, I—it was very easy to, to practice Islam. Oxford were—had plenty of places for people to access halal meat. There was a fairly decent community within the town, outside the university. There was a mosque that was quite active—now there's a beautiful mosque now in Oxford, but even back then it was a reasonably decent mosque. So all that was good. Oxford Center for Islamic Studies was there, which I did go to every now and then. There was an Oxford University Muslim society which was really useful as well, which I would go to sometimes too. So yeah, it was actually very good.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Did your college have a designated prayer space, or was there somewhere that you could go to pray?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

No, no, I—there wasn't at all. I mean, there was a college chapel. Every college had a chapel, which is completely understandable because the origins of Oxford University are associated with, you know, Christian culture and values, but there were no separate prayer spaces. And to be honest with you, I never expected one because we all lived on college. I mean, I mean, the, the college's policy was for everyone to live on college, and I, I had a room on college. So I was never more than five minutes' walk away from my room, so there was never any need to have a prayer room to pray. I would expect that today, it's a different day and age, and I, I expect that there probably would be prayer rooms in, in college now, but back then there wasn't. But it was never regarded as—I never regarded it as an issue or an impediment to offering my prayers.

Sadiya Ahmed:

And what was the name of the local mosque? Do you remember where it was?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

We just used to call it the Cowley Road Mosque, I mean, it was on Cowley Road. It probably did have a name, but I don't remember the name, we just used to call it Cowley Road. And I, I think they've got a modern mosque there now which has won some architectural awards for its design. I've been there once, many years ago—I was, I was there about fifteen years ago. I, I can't really remember it, to be honest, but I believe it's a very beautiful mosque now. When we were there, it was just a collection of old buildings that had been knocked together into, into a single mosque. But, but it did the job, it was, it was perfectly good.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Did you—do you remember much about the, the community at the mosque, where they were from?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

It was very much a sort of, I mean, double community in the mosque, because the mosque was broadly serving the Muslim community that was resident in Oxford as opposed to the university students. So there were a lot of community in Oxford—as you can imagine, because Oxford was an industrial town. There was a car factory, the Morris or Mini factory was in Oxford. So as you can imagine, there were thousands and thousands of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in particular who were migrants who used to work in those factories. So, so Oxford, being an industrial center, had a

large number of, of migrants. So mosque mainly served their needs, but then the university did have quite a few Muslims who would turn up at the mosque as well. So there'd be a smattering of Pakistanis and, you know, literally two or three Bangladeshis, you know, a couple of Mauritian, a couple of Africans, and probably a few Malaysians, you know, who would turn up at the mosque. We would be the odd ones out, I mean, you know, if you—the vast majority of people praying would be sort of local Oxford residents. But the mosques were, were fine. They were very similar to the atmosphere in mosques in London, like in Euston or in east London, et cetera—not different. Probably not a lot of women going to the mosque back then, I would say, compared to what you might find today, but nothing else to note really, yeah, yep. I knew a lot of people in the community because of Majlis, so we used to have to do quite a lot of fundraising for Majlis, and one way we would raise funds would be to get advertisements in the term card every term, and the advertisements would be—we would get a lot of advertisements from local Indian restaurants, and I—me being of a Bangladeshi background, I would, I would always find it quite easy to get their money, because I would, I would go in, I would speak to them in Bengali, and I would—and they would go “Oh, you're in Oxford, oh wow!” They'd be really proud of me, and then they'd be happily giving some money for the advertisement. And so I, I think we used to charge £50 for every advertisement, and, you know, if we'd get, if we'd get like, say, £400 from advertisements, that was, like, really good income for our society. So I'd be up and down Cowley Road a few times every couple of months, you know, trying to get advertisements for the term card, and usually I'd be quite successful. So I knew the community quite well, and they knew—some of them knew me, because I was one of the only Bangladeshi kids who was actually at the university. So that way I got to learn, got to know some of them quite well.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Do you remember the names of any of the, the restaurants?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, I really wish I could find those term cards for you, actually, because I'd be able to show you the ads. Yeah, there was Moonlight Restaurant—that was really a great one, Moonlight Restaurant, which was on Cowley Road. It's probably still there, actually. There was the, oh gosh—I think it was the Taj of India, I think, think it was called, which was right in the middle of Oxford, right in the middle of the university on Turl Street, I think it was. I can't remember some of the other names, to be honest, but Moonlight was a stalwart for us. And I still remember the one night when we had a Majlis cultural event, and it was a sitar and tabla recital by a famous Pakistani tabla player called [unknown name] and his son [unknown name], who were—[unknown name] is dead, but [unknown name] is a famous tabla player today. So they came to Oxford to do a recital, and it was a huge success. I remember driving down to London in my little car to pick them up, bring them for the concert. After the concert, we all decided to go to the Moonlight Restaurant for dinner, and, you know, so I rocked up to the Moonlight Restaurant with these superstars of, you know, classical

music, and the, the waiters were, like, completely gobsmacked. And we had this amazing dinner—it was probably about fifteen or twenty of us, had this amazing dinner. Still remember nights like that. There would have been a night when the Pakistan cricket team was in town, led by [unknown name], and there would have been a dinner at the Moonlight again with, with the Pakistan cricket team. Those were just phenomenal evenings. You know, you, you—you would, just amazing evenings. And of course, the restaurants would love it, because we would always rock up with famous people. It was good business for them, but it, but it was also really memorable—you'd take pictures, hang them up on the wall and stuff like that. So, some really good memories from that sort of interaction from, from the—with the local Oxford resident community.

Sadiya Ahmed:

I was going to ask about photographs; do you have any, or do you know if anybody has any from any of the nights?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, I'd have to do some research. I don't think I've got—I, I probably have actually, I, I would just need to dig them out. I could—I think I know where they are, which is in the shed somewhere in a, in a cardboard box, so I can't promise you but I, I—I'll give it a look and try and dig, dig some out if I can. For some reason, I haven't really organized those photos properly. So, I'll see if I can find some. I just wish I could find you a couple of those Majlis term cards, and if you're—if you're able to give me another minute, I might just want to, might just want to give it another look just to see if I can drag them out, because if I could show them to you on the video, I think it would be—do you want, do you mind if I just have another quick look, see if I can find them? Just give me a sec. I'm thinking they might be in here. ... No, it's just not my luck, I'm afraid. What I could do, if you're interested, is—if I find them, which I will be able to, I just need more time, if you wanted to do another short video call, we could maybe just do another short one with a few—with me showing you a few of those term cards.

Sadiya Ahmed:

That would be nice; that would be really insightful.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, I reckon that might be really worth it. I've actually got, I've got a lot of other historical stuff that I was just able to dig out. Like look at that, for example—that's from the nine—that, you remember I told you we went to Bangladesh in 1974 after Hajj? That was that trip, right? So that's my dad, straight after Hajj, that's my mum, I think I must be sitting here somewhere [unintelligible], can't see where I am here, but, you know, I've got—oh, that's me down there. You know, so sort of got—I've, I've got lots of photos, like, this one you can see the stamp on the back there, it's written in Bangla, of the photo. I've got a lot of stuff, actually, but I probably just wasn't thinking about it

that way for the call, but now that I'm aware of what you're looking for, I reckon I could probably get a few more—there, that's a picture of my dad from the 1960s, you know, I've got lots of this sort of stuff. I could—if you're interested, if you think it's worthwhile for your project—

Sadiya Ahmed:

It would be hugely—photographs, and anything in terms of documentation, is hugely important for the archive, because those are the historical records of that time, so I would implore you to go and dig, dig those, [unintelligible]—

Mohammad Chowdhury:

I mean I do know I've got access to a lot of stuff, right, so, you know, I mean look at this, I mean this is just—that is, that's a family tree of my father's side of the family going all the way back to—going back about six generations, so that's going back to probably about 1800.

Sadiya Ahmed:

That's amazing.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yep. So I, I've got a few things that I could—I now appreciate, sort of going—given the direction that your questions are taking, what you're, what you're looking for. So, yeah, if you're not—if you don't mind, I, maybe we could do a—I know we've been trying to do this interview for the last two years or something, but I could—we could—I could find the term cards, and we could, could perhaps do it based—sitting in the same place so you, so you could easily—I could wear the same shirt again if you want, whatever, and then you could, you could edit it in.

Sadiya Ahmed:

No, that's absolutely fine however you do it. Sort of staying back on you as a Muslim, how, how did you feel your identity as a Muslim played a role in shaping your personal and academic journey, if at all, while you were in Oxford?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, it's making me think. I, I don't necessarily think my identity as a Muslim shaped my academic journey, to be honest. I, I think I was really clear about my identity as a Muslim; I was very clear that I was a Muslim. I wasn't necessarily practicing as thoroughly as a Muslim as I, as I had done before going to university or, or I did resume after. But I, I never had any faltering in my faith and I, I never really got involved in any activities which went directly against my faith in terms of partying or drinking, et cetera, or taking drugs or any of that stuff. However, I wouldn't say that my religious identity or faith shaped my academic career, if you see what I mean. I mean, I think that I certainly took a lot of interest in political history, you know, of the Middle East and of the Indian

subcontinent, and I studied some of that. And it was a revelation to me to find out more about the impacts of colonialism and decolonisation, but those were more academic interests, if you like. And I, I, you know—

Sadiya Ahmed:

Do you think—

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, go on—

Sadiya Ahmed:

I was going to say, do, do you think the academic knowledge had any impact on your thoughts and feelings about the independence struggle? Did it change anything, or do you think, was it just that became more informed of that period?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

It certainly informed me a lot more because I learnt a lot more about the independence struggle from a fact and figures and, and sort of political developments perspective, which I had never really understood. And my tutor, my politics tutor for politics of South Asia, was a man called Dr. [unknown name] Rizvi. Now, Dr. Rizvi was himself a freedom fighter; he then went on to be a, a professor at Harvard after being at Oxford and he's now the Bangladesh Prime Minister's chief foreign affairs advisor. So he was my, he was my tutor for politics of South Asia. So learning from people like him, you know, we got a detail around the liberation struggle and the reasons for it, all the way from 1947 up to 71, that, you know, I'd never been aware of prior to going to university in that detail. And that was amazing, you know, to get that. So that gave me a really, really good grounding in, in understanding that. It didn't necessarily impact me emotionally, but it just helped me frame it and understand it better, which was, which was truly invaluable. And then when I went to see Dr. Rizvi like, probably about five years ago, I was in Dhaka, I got in touch with him and I went to the Prime Minister's office, which is where his office is, and I met him. And it's the first time I'd seen him in like thirty years. And he, he embraced me, gave me a big hug, said it, said it was so good to—for him to see one of his old students. I wasn't necessarily one of his most distinguished students, but he was very, very happy to see me.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Were any of your family, or do you know if any of your family were impacted directly by the partition in 1947?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Oh yeah, massively, yeah, there's hardly anyone who wasn't, I mean, I mean there was a huge impact, especially on my mother's side of the family. So, so I was talking quite a bit about my father and stuff—well, on my mother's side, my grandfather, so my mother's father, was from West Bengal. So he wasn't, he wasn't from what is now Bangladesh, he was from what is now India. He was from Calcutta, or near Calcutta. And so, yeah, he was the principal of a college in Calcutta at the time of the partition in 1947. So the partition directly impacted him because he was either going to become an Indian, or he would have to make a decision and move to East Pakistan if he wanted to be a Pakistani. Now, he was a very observant Muslim; he came from a very strictly observant Muslim family, so for him, that would have been a big issue, to decide what to do. And he had eight children, so my mother was one of eight. Now, what happened was that a week after partition, so in August 1947, he died. And so he left my grandmother a widow, one week after partition. And when he died, and as you know from the history, I mean, there was complete chaos in, in the cross border situation. We all famously know about what happened in the cross border on—in Punjab, between Lahore and [place name] and, and [place name], et cetera. But there was obviously the same sort of stuff going on on the, on the east as well. So when he died, my grandmother was left widowed with eight children. Now she was from East Bengal, she was from [place name] herself, right, so she had, she had no roots in West Bengal. So she had to leave, so with her husband dead, she left and went back to, to what was then East Pakistan. She crossed the border with her younger children. She left her two older children in Calcutta in college, but the younger ones she took with her and she moved. And she had to leave everything behind, so she left her house in Calcutta, didn't get any pensions or anything like that, and she just left with nothing. So that was the reason why my mother grew up in, basically in poverty, because there was no source of income anymore. And that is actually why she was so close to General Osmany, that I mentioned before in the interview, because General Osmany, back then, was a young major in the army, right? He was, in fact, the youngest major in the British Army in India, General Osmany. So he was commissioned in 1942, 1942, into the army, into the British Army, that is, right? And he was a major by 1945 or something, and he was very young. And he was the youngest major in the army. So he was then, like a—in the Pakistan Army, but his father was a prominent judge, and his father took my, my grandmother in, my grandmother was his niece, and said "You come and live here with your children." And that's why my mother was so close to General Osmany, because she grew up in his house, basically. So yeah, that's just one example, I mean, there were many impacts of partition on my, my family. More—so those are the impacts on my mother's side. On my father's side, there were other impacts. So my father's family were landowners in [place name], which is why we've got the family name Chowdhury, which means landowner. And the impact the partition had on their lives was that after partition, the power of the landowner dissolved quite quickly in East Pakistan. In West Pakistan, I believe the landlords continued to be politically and feudally quite powerful, but in East Pakistan—like in Punjab, for example, I think landowners—and [place name]—landowners continued to be powerful for a long time, and still are quite powerful. But in East

Pakistan, there was a land reform, and there was a local government reform. So landowners during the British period in East Bengal had been tax collectors, so people like my grandfather, his father, generations before him were all tax collectors. So they collect tax, owned large amounts of land, and they were quite wealthy. However, by about the early 1950s, because of local government reforms, because of the institution of the tax commission of East Pakistan, basically the power of the landlords just diminished because they didn't have a job anymore, because tax collection was done by the government. That basically completely destroyed the power of the landowner. Personally, I think that's not a bad thing, I think it's a good thing, because landowners, in my opinion, shouldn't be exerting too much power over the peasants because that results in all sorts of exploitation. So personally, I don't think that was a bad thing; however, the impact on my father's family was that the family went from a position from relative sort of wealth and privilege to one of being equal, all of the sudden, to the villagers that they used to, you know, sort of rule over. And so they sold up all their lands in the village areas, and they moved into the town, into a small house. So that was a massive change, and the—that's partly why my dad immigrated to the UK, because the family was in poverty. I mean, if the land reforms hadn't happened, they—we would never have thought about going to the UK, because they used to live like kings. I've seen what they used to live like—they used to have this huge, palatial house in the village. I've seen it; it's still there. But, you know, they had nothing. So I think, I think in different ways, that the partition and the decolonisation of British India had impacts. You know, you could argue that in some ways, people like my father's family were beneficiaries of colonisation, because colonisation was what actually afforded them huge amounts of political and civil power in, in the area, right, which they lost after decolonisation. So yeah, that's—I would say, those are just some perspectives.

Sadiya Ahmed:

I'm really conscious of the time, I've got like ten minutes and it's probably, what, coming up to half-eleven in the evening for you. I want to ask you one quick question, even though we've got lots more from, from the sheets, but, so, your father went from nothing to having tea with the Queen. Can you just tell us a little bit about that story, just to end on a lighter note?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, totally, yeah, so he was invited to Buckingham Palace twice—I think 1977-ish and about 1981, I think, if I remember correctly; each time because of services to the community, so garden parties hosted by the Queen—each time because of services that he'd provided to the community, so some of the stuff that I referred to before around the work that he was doing in the community. So, in addition to, you know, working for Bangladesh freedom, he also did a lot of work for the immigrant communities in the UK. So, for example, if you remember the first Hindi and Urdu language television program that came out in the UK, which was in nine—in the late 1960s. There was a program, I think it was called *Nai Zindagi Naya Jeevan*, which sort of means "New era, new life" type of thing, right? So my dad was one of the people that lobbied the BBC—

Sadiya Ahmed:

Oh my gosh!

Mohammad Chowdhury:

—to do a non-English-language program, right? And we used to joke with my Dad; we used to say, “Why did you lobby for an Urdu and Hindi language program when you’re a Bengali?” And he said “Well, that’s because I was a Pakistani at the time, and Urdu was our national language, so I just lobbied for it to be in Urdu. I—I don’t really care, you know, I lobbied for it to be in Urdu.” So, so he did stuff like that, so he was very heavily involved in, you know, community types of activities. And he was a pretty practical sort of guy; he wasn’t really looking for the limelight, he was more—like, wanted to get good stuff done. And luckily enough, he was recognized for that by, by being invited for—going to the palace. And yeah, they were, they were good, good moments. I remember the day in 81 when my mum and dad went and, you know, all dressed up. I still remember, the, the—I’ve got a photo, actually, I’ll get the photo out for the next time we meet. And, you know, they, they got—actually, I can probably find it while we’re chatting. So, you know, it, it was a great, it was a great achievement. We were all super amazingly proud of, of the achievement of getting invited. It meant a, meant a whole lot. Yeah, so it was, it was good, really good. I’m going to see if I can find this photo. I should be able to find this photo. Hopefully I’ve got it on my—you know I’ve got all the photos on the drive, right? I think I’ve shown you this before—my little treasure trove of photographs. So I should have access to this if I can just get this fast enough. I reckon it was about 1981—ah yeah, there you go. Got it, yeah, found it. So, right, okay—

Sadiya Ahmed:

Yeah, I remember that. That’s such a beautiful photograph, and your mum’s green sari, and the smile, and the pride on their faces, it just—you can tell that’s a very special moment, very special.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Very special. Yeah, the gloves—and if you look at the car, you can see the big white piece of paper that’s sellotaped to the window. That was the entrance pass to get into the, the palace. So if you—don’t know if you can see it now, hold on—see it was a big ‘X’. That was the—basically the ID for driving into the, into the palace grounds. So yeah, so that was, yeah—

Sadiya Ahmed:

Your insights have been incredibly valuable. You were talking about—what’s it called, the program? What was it?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

It was *Nai Zindagi Naya Jeevan*.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Yeah, yeah, I mean, I was talking about that just yesterday—we were just talking about how important that program was for our parents and grandparents because it was literally the only Asian-language or Punjabi-speaking program on. And the only way that our community had any access to hearing their language, because our communities were so small that they didn't have that interaction otherwise, other than in their own home or if they went to a cinema and watched a Bollywood movie. And that interaction was so incredibly important. I remember as a small child, being sat—made to be sat in front of the TV watching these old people talking in language I just about knew, and I was like four, five. And all I remember is the screen—watching these people and, and, you know, all of this music—someone's coming on with a sitar, there's [unknown word] playing, and just some sort of general information about whenever service is. But I just remember my parents, and how very important it was for them. And just because it was important to them, I would make sure that I respected that, even as a, as a really young child, because I could really feel how important it was. So, your father did such an amazing service that I don't know if you could ever begin to, to understand how important that was, because that, that program in itself is something that comes up again and again and again in our, in our interviews, too, being so important to people. So yeah, thank you on behalf of all the people we've interviewed and my own family and my own experience of just that one program. It's, it's invaluable and it's—it must, you know, you must feel so proud of what your, your father did. It's—I can't begin to express how invaluable that was. But thank you so much. We've got four minutes left. Yeah, I mean, you can see where—excuse me—where the trajectory of, of this interview is. It's really important for us to get as many details, as many of these stories that we just don't really realize how important they are to, to a wider community. A lot of our archives are now being used for research about the South Asian community, whether it's the Muslim community or wider—excuse me, you did the talking, my voice is going! But yeah, the photographs, I know it's such a huge, huge undertaking for you to do this, but if you were able to find some more photographs, especially of those nights out, they're hugely invaluable. We're putting together a heritage walking trail in Oxford, and some of those places that you've mentioned will be on that, on that trail. So to have photographs would be incredibly invaluable. But photographs of you growing up as a child, your family photographs, from them we get so much information—the clothes you wore, your, your parents' car, your house. There's so much more detail that researchers and academics can glean from visual references that, you know, that we can't always—I can't always appreciate.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Yeah, no, I've got, I've got a lot. I'll, I'll need to put some of this together. I mean look, I mean, I've got things like newspaper cuttings from "The Curry Queen". This is—what year is this? It's probably about late 1970s, probably mid eight—this is 1985 or so. Yeah, you've got stuff like that. I've got, I've got loads and loads of things. I'll need to—what I'll need to do, if it's okay with you, is probably

spend a bit of time—it'll take me a couple of afternoons. I, I'll need to sort of go through this myself and see what I've got. It's a pity I'm not in England, otherwise I'd just, you know, get it—put it all somewhere and come and meet you. But I've got a lot of stuff, you know, I've got stuff like this, like me, you know, cycling around—

Sadiya Ahmed:

This is perfect, I mean, these are the exact kind of images that we're looking for.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

I—I've got—

Sadiya Ahmed:

I've got—we've got like thirty seconds left on this meet, so if we cut off, I'll email you and we'll keep in touch to keep the conversation going, because I think there's a lot—

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Let's do the next one in a few weeks, if that's okay, because I'm off to Europe in another four days for a week and a bit.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Probably after Ramadan?

Mohammad Chowdhury:

After Ramadan. If we, if we do it after Ramadan, it would be better because I'll have enough time to just pull a few things together and, and enrich the discussion. But I've got a really good idea, I've got a really better idea now also of how you want to weave the stories together. And so I, I think I'll be able to, to have enough stuff to keep showing you, et cetera. Yeah, let's just do it that way.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Especially if it gives any more details about the lobbying your father did and the changes that he made, it's really important to get the names of those people who were behind all of that and—

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Okay. I've got some ideas. I have a WhatsApp group of some contemporaries and we talk about these things quite a lot, so I'll, I'll put the questions in, and I'll, I'll have to—I'll try and do some research to pull this together. I reckon let's just target May or the month of May, or say. And not—not in the next few weeks. Just give me a bit of time and, and let's, let's give this another go, and then hopefully you'll have enough to—material to sort of edit from.

Sadiya Ahmed:

That would be amazing, thank you so much. Thank you for your time. I'm going to let you go, because otherwise it will go on for a very long time.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

No, not at all. And give, give my salaams to your husband as well, hope he's well, and—Irfan, Irfan, right?

Sadiya Ahmed:

Yeah, Irfan.

Mohammad Chowdhury:

Irfan, right. All right, thanks very much, and see you next time.

Sadiya Ahmed:

Okay, good night, [unknown phrase].

Mohammad Chowdhury:

[Unknown phrase].