Context and Summary

This interview provides insights into the experiences of Munaza Dogar who lives in Oxford, England. Munaza, discusses her family's migration from Pakistan in the 1970s and her upbringing in the diverse Pakistani community of Walthamstow, London. She reflects on the importance of religion, culture, and community in her childhood, as well as navigating her identity as a Muslim in educational and professional settings.

Munaza's experiences highlight the challenges of being part of a racial and religious minority in a less diverse area like Oxfordshire, particularly in terms of representation and inclusion within schools and community institutions. She describes efforts to integrate Muslim traditions and values into her children's upbringing and the local community, as well as the ongoing need to educate and raise awareness about Muslim experiences.

Despite these obstacles, Munaza has found ways to stay connected to her faith and build community, such as through local mosque initiatives and starting a women's cricket team. Overall, the interview provides a nuanced perspective on what it means to be a practicing Muslim in the UK today, especially in regions outside of major metropolitan areas.

Aleena Din:

Can you begin with stating your name and your date of birth? Well, you could just say your year of birth, and where you were born.

Munaza:

Yeah, so my name is Munaza Dogar; I was born as Munaza Dar. I was born in 1976 at Whips Cross Hospital in Waltham Forest, which is in London, a borough in London.

Aleena Din:

And could you tell me a bit about your family? Your parents, siblings?

Munaza:

Yeah, mom and dad, both from Pakistan originally. Came to settle here in the early '70s. They actually got married, they had [inaudible 00:02:31] right over the phone. And then my mum came to Walthamstow and then they had the, I guess, Walima, in Walthamstow in 1972. So, at a time where food was cooked at home and everything was done within the family, etc.

And I'm one of five siblings. I have an older brother and then it's me, followed by two sisters and then a younger brother.

Aleena Din:

Do you have any reflections or memories of your parents sharing their experiences of being Muslims in London? What was their time like?

Munaza:

Yeah, I think it's probably quite a common thread that our parents never really used to speak about their experiences, and storytelling wasn't really a big part of my childhood.

I was quite fortunate that we grew up with a lot of family, very, very local. So I grew up in Walthamstow. My dad's eldest brother out of all of his siblings lived a two minute walk away. My dad's sister, cousins. A few

years later, my dad's other sister moved to Peterborough. He's also got another brother in Walthamstow now. And lots of my mom's cousins, two of my dad's, he has two maternal aunts; they were both in Walthamstow too. So, we were really blessed to have a really good extended family that we spent all of our time with, to the point where actually we didn't really have friends because our cousins were our friends and our parents invested all of their time with one another, as well as working.

Aleena Din:

Sure. And did that also extend to having family friends, like your parents having friends outside of their siblings?

Munaza:

Yeah, they did have family friends, my parents beyond cousins and siblings, but they were friends of everybody in our family as opposed to my mum having a best friend who doesn't know her family. It was all very interconnected. There's a good Pakistani community in Walthamstow and it was very much about being with other Pakistanis. I guess in the '60s, '70s when they came they'd share houses, rent rooms from each other, etc., and so that became their base.

And it was all very geographical. It was people within walking distance, so you might not know people on the other side of Walthamstow in the same context.

Aleena Din:

And what were your parents' occupations?

Munaza:

My dad, before he came from Pakistan, was studying statistics at university and he gave that up and became a labourer in Walthamstow. He worked for the London Rubber Company as a supervisor, so kind of worked up into management, but still within the factory, not at an office level. So, floor level management.

My mum was a machinist, I guess. Would sew clothes, worked from home. Worked very hard, I remember. I don't have any recollection of her taking a day off. She would have time off, but worked really, really hard. So, both my parents worked incredibly hard and that was a common theme amongst all of my relatives. My aunties, my uncles, they all worked. My aunties all worked from home making clothes. They all had their Big Brother sewing machines. And the dad would have various jobs. I did have an uncle who would go to the office and work. He was in insurance, etc. But everybody worked. There was a real good work ethic in my family.

Aleena Din:

Right, yeah. And was work the reason why your parents or your extended family members came to the UK?

Munaza:

Yeah, I think it was. And I think again, another common thread where one sibling or one family friend or one family member moves and then the others follow. Although interestingly, my dad is one of eight. His eldest brother moved and my dad is brother number four. He then moved and rented a room, stayed with my uncle, and then a couple of years later my parents bought their own house. But his other siblings, brothers, stayed in Pakistan. One moved to America and the other stayed. And then the youngest brother eventually moved to Walthamstow. He got married to a family member and moved here. But both of my dad's sisters migrated here after marriage.

Aleena Din:

Right. And did you feel, as a child, a connection to Pakistan?

Munaza:

Yeah, we did. I mean, I guess if you think back 40 years, you know, I'm going to be 48 next month, we would go every few years. So I've got memories, really nice memories of going to Pakistan with my family. There was a big commitment on my dad's part to send money back home, which again, I guess I think is another common thread. They would take vans back to Pakistan. So my dad, my parents and my older sibling with my extended family, they've got really, really fun memories of road trips that they made from Walthamstow to Pakistan, which I think I did once, but I was a baby. So, unfortunately, I don't have any recollection of that. But my mum would tell me stories about those journeys.

Aleena Din:

Wow, that's amazing.

Munaza:

Yeah, yeah.

Aleena Din:

Yeah, taking a drive.

Munaza:

And actually, you know, your earlier question about kind of stories, my mum would tell us stories. My dad was more of, I guess, a closed book. He was very hardworking, but my granddad was a wrestler and he actually wanted my dad to become a wrestler too. My grandad and my dad were really close, even though my dad was child number four, or son number four. But my grandad passed away at a really young age, which I think changed their family dynamics. And even though my dad was brother number four, a lot of the family responsibilities fell on him. I don't know whether he was a natural-born leader or just somebody who liked to help other people, but he was the person everybody would always call, whether it was an electrical issue, a car issue, they're buying a house. You know, any issue, it would be my dad who would get that phone call.

Aleena Din:

And in terms of your mom's stories, her memories, how often would those conversations happen?

Munaza:

I mean, they were a part of us growing up. She has a very big family. I think she had... I might be making this up, maybe seven, eight maternal aunts and three maternal uncles. And I know she was closer to her mum's side of the family than her dad's, and I think that's just geographically because they lived locally. So I grew up with lots of khalas and ammas and it was really lovely. I knew I had, my mum is one of five, but beyond that I've got really good memories and I'm actually really close to some of my second cousins, just because of the relationship that my mum has with these cousins.

My mum was really young when she got married. I think she was 18 or 19 when she moved here. So, I know that my granddad, my mum's dad was in the railway. He was, again, a very disciplined man, liked routine and structure. Education was always really important, although my mum would often look back and think, "Oh, I was taken out of my studies." So she never really got the opportunity to fulfil, I guess, you know if you think

about an 18-year-old now, you're still very young. And so I guess their dreams were never really more than their dreams and they just moved with the present.

But we had a very secure childhood. Lots of love, school was always a priority, education was always a priority. If I think back to all of my cousins, and I've got lots of first cousins local to me, we probably had at least 20 cousins growing up. We all went to university. Maybe more, and it was a real priority that we would study. It wasn't necessarily what we would study; that wasn't dictated to us, but it was always that education is very important and there was a real value across all the families that education is really important.

Aleena Din:

Was that something that you feel was instilled by the women in your family? Given-

Munaza:

No, I think it was both my parents. And if I think back, my mum would probably do a bit more of the... I remember her listening to us read, but my dad would be the one to make us sit down and do handwriting practise. And until it was legible, we'd carry on. Oh, we've got stories of my sister, who's 18 months younger, didn't have very neat handwriting and she would often be the one sat there, practising handwriting more than my older brother and I.

Aleena Din:

And on the topic of school, you say Walthamstow had a big Pakistani community, or a decent sized one. What was your experience like in school being Pakistani, being Muslim?

Munaza:

Yeah, it's interesting. Whilst there were lots of Pakistanis, I remember primary school, or enough that I can remember, you know, you've got to remember I was at primary school with my brother, with my sister who's younger than me, with another cousin who's my age. I've got a cousin who's a year older. So, already there were four or five of us at school together. So that's a big part of my childhood, both at home and at school.

But I always, how do I put it? There was some very traditional Pakistani families where the girls weren't encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities or school trips. And we never felt, or at least I never felt, that I was prevented from doing anything that was linked to education. So whilst my parents weren't keen on me having sleepovers, and actually my dad didn't even like me going to birthday parties at primary school. He had quite strong beliefs that it just didn't make him feel comfortable. And I guess that comes with not knowing your community, perhaps. Never really unpicked why, but if it came to school trips, we always went on school trips. If it came to playing sports at secondary school, my mum would say, "You play all the sports that the boys want to play."

They wouldn't moan, but they'd say, "You're doing everything," which meant me going to school a lot out of school hours. But they never stopped me from doing that when it was linked to school. We didn't know about clubs, girls playing netball. I remember at secondary school an opposition teacher asking me what club I play for. She said, "Oh, you're really good. Who do you play for?" And it left me confused for, I was probably about 13. And I said, "What do you mean I play for school?" And she said, "No, what club do you play for?" And I said, "I don't." And she said, "You should play for a club."

But my teacher had never introduced that to me. And in our community, I wasn't aware, my parents weren't aware. We didn't know where to go to look for those things. My brother played football for a club, but that was probably because there were lots of boys who were playing football for clubs. Whereas I don't really know anything about girls playing netball, for example.

Aleena Din:

Right. And you mentioned this word a few times, community. It's a word that I've used as well. Did you feel part of a community?

Munaza:

I felt part of my family community. And I think that's for me growing up, when I sit back and I talk to my cousins now as well, particularly up until secondary school at the end of... So, I went to a local primary school. It was on the same block, a two minute walk, if that, from home. You need to cross one road and you'd be at school. Secondary school was further because my dad was adamant I wasn't going to go to a girls' only school. And my catchment school was a girls' only school, very local. And he said, "No, you need to learn how to integrate with boys. I want you to be able to communicate with them and it not be an issue, etc."

So I went to the same secondary school that my brother and my cousin went to, that I've mentioned that family before. They're very local to us. And that was probably about a mile, just over a mile. So in the mornings Mathaia would take me to school with my cousin, and then when my sister was old enough, she'd come with us. And then my dad would pick the three of us up from school. And I don't ever recall really walking home from school.

You've asked me about community and the Pakistani community. I actually found, without sounding... There's no other word. I found myself having less in common as I got older with the Pakistani girls in my community. With my cousins, it was different. But I wanted to play sports. I think I was the only Pakistani girl. Maybe there was one other actually at my secondary school. And we weren't a huge number, but there were enough. It was diverse, who wanted to play sports. I wore trousers to school. I wasn't allowed to wear a skirt, but trousers were part of uniform. And actually even in the 1980s, I went to secondary school from 1987 to 1992, you could wear salarcomies. It was diverse enough for salarcomies to be accepted as part of the school uniform. I didn't. I was allowed to, I guess is the word, to wear English clothes out of the home. I was encouraged to wear salarcomies at home.

And that changed as I got older and we pushed boundaries a little bit saying, "Why do we have to wear Salarcomies at home?" And I guess it's what you're saying about belonging to community. That awareness that people outside, and I'm not talking just about the Muslim community. I'm talking about the wider context of the community you are in. I used to feel uncomfortable. I didn't feel wearing salarcomies necessarily represented who I was when I was outside of the home.

And maybe that's that awareness of feeling a bit different or not wanting to feel different. As a teenager, you probably don't want to stand out and from day one, you've always been different in the way that you explain your differences to people. And I think it was about maybe trying to blend in.

Aleena Din:

It's interesting talking about dress, talking about maybe ideas of how to conduct yourself and the ways in which your family might have been a bit different from other Pakistani families. How much of that, I guess moralising, is attached to being Muslim as well? Was there a difference or did you see that being Pakistani, being Muslim-

Munaza:

Yeah, there was a different. So I think a lot of the differences that I saw were cultural, and it was cultural values that we often hear this, don't we? Where religion is confused with culture?

Aleena Din:

Yeah.

Munaza:

And religion has changed because of culture. And actually, even probably some of what I experienced as well was possibly cultural. But I guess we were just a moderate family in the middle. We were aware of Islam. I remember my mum praying from the very beginning and then I do remember then, my dad taking up [inaudible 00:20:17] five times a day. We didn't eat McDonald's. Growing up in Walthamstow then was very different. There were no halal fast food takeaways. You can't imagine London now without a chicken shop or halal food. There was none of that. I think there was a Turkish fast food Donna place. That's probably still there, I think, [foreign language 00:20:41] which as we grew up, we became aware of and occasionally as a treat, maybe in Ramadan we would go and get a Donna Kebab and share it.

But I had family members who would go to McDonald's sometimes, but we never had non-halal food. It was very clear that our diet didn't include that. And there were halal meat shops. So it's not like we grew up without meat. It was just meat was eaten in the house.

And I think going back to my point about making friends, I struggled then because, generally, the Pakistani girls in my community at that time, I felt like I had less in common. I wanted to study, I wanted to get good grades, I wanted to play sports and they weren't really interested in that. And I guess they were just values that were instilled in me from the beginning. My mum left school early, but I remember her, she was always really active and into sports. My dad was obviously healthy and active and very disciplined. He would do yoga every morning for five minutes and I would be the one who would lie down next to him and imitate what he was doing. And he did that every morning until he fell ill.

Aleena Din:

Right. And you describe your family as moderate, in terms of, you know, how you position yourselves.

Munaza:

Kind of in the middle.

Aleena Din:

Did you attend mosque? Was that something that other families do?

Munaza:

No, there were no opportunities for girls or women to attend mosques at that point. So for [foreign language 00:22:30], my dad would go to the mosque. The mosque was actually closer to my secondary school, and it was only when I was probably at six form, maybe a bit older, that a local mosque was built that you could walk to.

So I don't ever recall my brothers at young age going to [foreign language 00:22:48] like you could do now, you could take children. And obviously my dad used to work, so it was when he was at home. But [foreign language 00:22:55] everybody would always go and all the men in the family would do their rounds at morning, coming to everybody's house for breakfast. That, I always slightly resented because I thought it was unfair that they got to go to everybody's house for breakfast and we had to stay at home. But then we would always get together at lunchtime and the rest of the day would be spent doing the same thing, going to each other's houses. So that was always really nice.

Aleena Din:

So, given that women and girls didn't necessarily have access to the mosque, what did your religious education look like?

Munaza:

I went for Quran lessons to this lady's house. I didn't particularly enjoy it. I probably got some trauma linked to it. My older brother went to a different auntie's house where she would have lots of children. For some reason my mom sent me to this other lady's house where there were fewer children, but I was really young. I think I was... I'm born in '76. By 1983, February, and I'll explain why I remember this-

1983 February, and I'll explain why I remember this day. I'd finished the Quran once, so that makes me six, just turning seven. So my birthday is February 27th. And this was, by February the sixth, my dad's brother-in, my papa's [inaudible 00:24:21], my uncle died and he was the first family member that we lost. He was young. He gone to work, he had a heart attack and he died. So that was in 1983, February the 6th. And that had a big impact on all of us, huge impact.

So going back to my Islamic influence. Obviously in the house, my parents would read Quran and pray and my extended family would do as well. And things like Shab-e-Barat, all the aunties would get together at somebody's house. So we've got really fun memories of sleepovers and just lots of giggling and fun whilst the moms were praying and there was some of us, we did pray, but it was a thing that we did with our girl cousins. And I was probably six then when I started to learn the Quran. I would go five days a week straight after school for two hours to this auntie's house.

I didn't enjoy it. She was very firm. You would get hit if you'd made mistakes. So that almost traumatises you because you know you're going to make a mistake and you know what's coming. My mum was aware that this is what she used to do and she'd say, "It's okay, you're almost there." And then I read the Quran once and I just remember my uncle had passed away and I'd missed some lessons. And I remember her saying, "You've got to have learned," It might've been too karmic, I can't remember. And I remember saying to my mom, "I can't do this. This is too much." And then I stopped going. But yeah, that was, thinking back I was actually really young. I thought I was eight, but I wasn't. But that was tough. So that was my kind of Quran introduction. And then we would read every day at home. There was no set time, but Ammi would always encourage us to read a page, two pages every day.

And then as I got older, I've got a lot of cousins, remember I've told you, female cousins, there used to be an Islamic class at another lady's house, about 15, 20 minute walk from where we grew up. And she would have Islamic classes every Friday evening. And I remember going to those with my cousin. And I think it was probably done in the way that I just remember lots of scary stories, but that might just be more my young age and being scared of death and hell and all of that. I think they were quite useful. I remember it being in somebody's living room and it being very busy.

Yeah. And I guess alongside that, we used to have Urdu classes with my mom's friend. So I learnt to read and write Urdu, which unfortunately then I didn't continue. So now once I'm fluent in speaking Urdu, I can write my name and I've forgotten everything else. And reading, it's very basic now. And I guess religion is a part of our family and probably, I remember going to university and that's when I started to pray five times a day and it became a big part of who I was without, I guess without the external pressure of my mom saying, you must pray, go and read in a mosque. It just was something that I may be coming away from home. When I looked at what made me, I realised that that was a core part of who I was.

And maybe that just happened with you know how sometimes these things just happen because they're happening all around you. Ramadan was a big part in my family. Everybody kept fast. I'm talking about my extended family here. So my community growing up, most my family, everybody, Ramadan was a big part. My mum and the aunt would all send food to each other during Ramadan and neighbours would do that as well. So we did have Pakistani neighbours on our street, so not necessarily next door. Had an aunt who still lives actually on the same street. So there was a lot of kind of interchanging there during Ramadan of food. And it was always quite exciting to see what somebody had sent. Yeah. So it wasn't forced, but it happened very naturally.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:24:04]

Aleena Din:

I wonder then what your experience was, like RS lessons at school. How much education in Islam were you getting from non Muslims?

Munaza:

If I'm honest with you, I don't really recall a lot of, I remember we had humanities, which was geography and history. I don't really remember much beyond that in terms of provision or we must have learned about religions. But it's interesting that I don't have any real recollection of Islam in school. College was different because my school was 11 to 16, so there were two main colleges in Walthamstow. So Walthamstow is a borough and within Waltham Forest, the borough of Waltham Forest, you've got different parts. So you've got Walthamstow, Leytonstone, Chingford, and I'm probably forgetting Woodford, South Woodford. And if you think about geographically walking distance, there were two colleges. One was known for being more vocational and one was more academic.

So I went to St. George Monoux, which half of Walthamstow would've gone to. Occasionally some people would go to Leytonstone, but that would mean getting a bus, et cetera. And it just wasn't on my radar. And there it was different because then you've got a bigger Muslim community because you've got all the local secondary school children coming together there. And there might've been the odd 11 to 18 school, but from memory, I think most schools were 11 to 16.

Aleena Din:

So was the, I guess education you were getting in college just between other Muslims or was this something being taught to you?

Munaza:

Yeah, so that's where my friend, interestingly, that's where my friendship group shifted. So I went, from primary school, my two best friends were Caucasian, and it was nothing to do with colour, it was what we had in common. Secondary school was a mixture. I was one of two girls to go from my primary school to my secondary school. So that transition was quite hard and most of the people who then went to that secondary school, my secondary school, Kelmscott, all came from local feeder schools. So it's a little bit of adjustment fitting in and my friendship group was probably slightly more mixed. It was predominantly Caucasian, but that's probably because it was predominantly Caucasian.

I had one Pakistani friend and one Indian, Hindu friend whose still a really good friend of mine. And we became friends from the age of 11 and we just always drawn to each other. And I think we were drawn to each other because I guess we were both into studying because she's not very sporty. But I still did sports and I remember girls being scared of the hockey ball and I'd get across, it's only a ball, it doesn't matter. Let's play.

And then when I got to sixth form, sports changed. And I think that's where I then became detached from sports because I remember playing rounders and things for fun. I don't think there was any organised team, particularly for girls. There's probably a football team or a cricket team and that's probably part of the bit I regret, but I regret in the way that it makes me feel sad that I stopped doing sports, but I didn't know any better. I didn't know about where else I could go. And then I guess you lose a bit of confidence. I would still exercise. We'd go to aerobics classes or we'd go to our local gym which was next door to our school. I was never a good swimmer, so I can't say I used to go swimming for fun because I can't swim very well even now.

But sports is now a really big part of me. So it's kind of come back. So sixth form and university and even when I did my postgraduate, no interaction with sports, like organised sports. I got my children into sports from a really young age. So whilst my husband's sporty, it was a joint thing of when are they starting football. And then I got my son. I've got four children, two boys and two girls. I realise we've gone off on a big tangent,

but the sports has kind of taken me here. I got him signed up for cricket. So the two boys both played football and cricket.

Then I had my daughter, so I had three children within, just under five years. Rabia used to go and watch her brothers play football, watch them play cricket, she got into cricket at a really young age. We never signed her up for football, but then I got all of them into hockey, and that was something I really enjoyed at school. So now there's six in my family, my husband, myself, and my four children. Apart from my husband, we all play hockey, which is really nice. And we all play cricket. But that's a different story so we can come back to that.

Aleena Din:

I guess now maybe moving on to, I'll just see if we're still recording. Maybe moving on to that transition into university, where did you go for university and,-

Munaza:

I went,-

Aleena Din:

What motivated that decision?

Munaza:

Yeah. Again, if that's one thing I would probably change, I would probably change. So I went to sixth form, fast-forward, and my 3A levels that I chose to study were French, English literature and language combined and history. I'd never studied history before, but I absolutely loved, that was my favourite subject. And I guess being a sixth form college, it was a bit different. Teachers said, "Oh, you can call us by our first names." And it was different. The English teachers were quite traditional. They wanted to be Mrs. Nolan, I still remember her. She was great and French actually. But the history were definitely like, "Call us by our first names," which was a bit odd, but then you get used to it.

And I wanted to be a journalist. So there was a joke in my family and my great uncle, so my dad's [inaudible 00:35:54]. He just passed away this year actually, age 102. We found out. We thought he was 100. He'd said, "Are you going to be the next Kate Adie?" So she was obviously a big journalist at the time, right, be on the news, et cetera. And I was adamant at sixth form that I was going to be a journalist. And I remember my history teachers almost pleading with me saying, "You don't have to study journalism at university to become a journalist. Go and do what you love." And I was adamant. So against their advice, I didn't apply for history, which in hindsight, I think probably if I could go back, I probably would've studied history at undergrad level. I ended up studying media at university and I had the option of going to either city or South Bank because the degree I wanted was quite vocational. So traditional universities, like now Nottingham offers it. They didn't offer that all those years ago.

And I really wanted to get involved in the practical side and city didn't offer it. So I ended up going to South Bank University and that was a different experience. I lived out. I could have commuted, it was probably an hour door to door, but my parents were very supportive of saying, no, you can move out. I moved into halls of residence in Elephant and Castle, made a really good friend, African British girl, and we kind of hit it off. There were some Asians in my course as well who, my transition, I spoke about going from secondary school to six form college. That's where more I became friends with more Asian people and it shifted and I don't know whether it was a sudden awareness of, oh look, there's lots more people like me. Although now I think back, they weren't particularly into studying or sports, but they were just really nice people and I had a really good time with them. Although Maya was my constant friends throughout and we were both into studying, so I guess I had her to keep me grounded in that sense.

And university was a mixed experience, lots of socialising and making lots of friends. Actually, I remember in my halls there were a group of boys from Rochdale and they're really nice, became friends with them. My cousin was at university in London and she'd been a constant throughout. We didn't go to the same secondary school, but she became a part of that group as friends as well. So I probably did more with her than I did with my university friends. I think I used to go home most weekends, but that was my choice, not I was made to. I didn't really integrate beyond my degree. Going to the student union, that was a whole different, it was eye-opening for me because for the first time I saw lots of girls coming from really, I guess traditional family backgrounds. And this was the opportunity to just, I guess discover themselves by testing lots of boundaries. And then in my first year of university, we went to Pakistan. My cousin got married and I fractured my lower back.

Aleena Din:

Wow.

Munaza:

And might, hold on. I'm just trying to work out whether it was my first or my second year. I think it was my first year and I can't remember now, but it was a downward spiral. I couldn't travel out properly. I moved back home. So it would've been in my second year. So first year I was in Halls. Second year we had this amazing flat in Baywater with my cousin and some uni friends that I'd made. And then that Christmas I moved back home just because I was too unwell. And I really became detached from university because I was living at home.

So I'd go to my lectures, I'd probably see my course friends, but it wasn't, people talk about university being this great experience, etc. It probably wasn't so great for me towards the end. I had a first really good 18 months and then things changed. I still really enjoyed my course. I remember studying economics and thinking, wow, I love this. And I'd never come across economics before. Really enjoyed law. My dissertation was on the misrepresentation of British Muslims in the media. So that was really interesting and at a time where ironically it would just be as applicable today as it was all those years ago.

Aleena Din:

Right. Yeah.

Munaza:

Yeah. And so I really enjoyed that. I remember going to Bradford as part of my dissertation and with my Bradford friend. She must've driven because I couldn't drive. We went into the Town Centre. We interviewed lots of Pakistanis and Muslims about what it feels like to be Muslim and how do you feel that you're represented or misrepresented in the media, etc. And that was really exciting. So there were exciting pockets when I think back to my course and what I wanted to study. I didn't end up being a journalist.

I ended up taking a year out after I graduated, but not because I didn't know what to do. I wanted to become a teacher, which is bizarre because I'd never thought of myself as becoming a teacher. I did do an internship at the United Nations in my second year in New York, which was great. I have an aunt and uncle who used to work for the United Nations and UNICEF and he arranged it for me. And that was really interesting, really interesting. I worked in the media department. I remember producing my own programme where I interviewed two women. I'm trying to think about what it was. And I think it was to do about representation of women,-

Aleena Din:

Right.

Munaza:

And recording it, bit like what we're doing today and then producing it. So that was really exciting. But for some reason I ended up going for teaching and I don't know whether it's because I'd hurt my back and things were a bit tough. So I worked for a year just locally, saved money, brought a car, and then went to Nottingham to do my teaching.

Aleena Din:

Wow.

Munaza:

Yeah.

Aleena Din:

Such an exciting experience being at uni.

Munaza:

Yeah, and it was. Yeah.

Aleena Din:

A rollercoaster.

Munaza:

I guess I'd always been really independent and really wanted to travel and just explore new places. So actually going away didn't faze me. Going to New York didn't faze me. I lived with an uncle that I knew but didn't know particularly well and an aunt and they were amazing. And they've got two sons and I had a really good trip. The department I worked in, there was a Muslim man from Tanzania and he said, "Oh, you remind me of my daughter. Would you like to meet her?" And this is all before phones, right, and social media. I said, "Yeah." So I met her and we became really good friends and she's still a friend to this day. So it did, all these opportunities have enabled me to meet really amazing people,-

Aleena Din:

Yeah.

Munaza:

Who are still a part of me today.

Aleena Din:

And how has meeting, I mean, like meeting other Muslims from different parts of the country, different parts of the world,-

Munaza:

Yeah.

Aleena Din:

How did that affect your sense of self?

Munaza:

It's quite hard because I think what I've realised is that everybody has their own perception of what it is to be Muslim. And we were always brought up to not be judgmental of people. And I think from a very early, like I don't ever remember my mom and dad judging people. And so for me meeting Muslims who might eat non-halal food, so I've got cousins in America and they grew up eating non-halal food, but that's because their parents have justified it in a way that it's hard to access. And I remember visiting, I used to visit quite a lot and I found it really bizarre because they ordered vegetarian pizza for the adults and meat pizza for the kids. And I was like, well, that leaves me in a bit of a tricky situation because I'd be having the vegetarian pizza and it was fine. And it was just, and everybody respected it and it wasn't an issue and I didn't make any judgement . And I guess it's in your perception and what you feel is right for you.

But it was really nice to just go and hang out with people who had the same beliefs. You weren't being in uncomfortable situations where there's alcohol around you and you don't feel comfortable around it. So that was really nice to be able to just feel at home and at ease.

Aleena Din:

Yeah.

Munaza:

Yeah.

Aleena Din:

I'll grab another pen before we carry on.

Munaza:

Yeah.

Aleena Din:

It just ran out halfway, but I guess, let me just grab this. I have so many questions about your experiences at university and especially the study that you were doing for your dissertation.

Munaza:

Yeah.

Aleena Din:

What were the findings of that? What were people saying and does it do you think still resonate today?

Munaza:

Yeah, 100%. 100%.

Aleena Din:

Yeah.

Munaza:

Because I think it was always about this narrative. So when I was growing up in the media, it was African men who were painted as the ones that you needed to be scared of. And I was mugged at 18. I just finished my

history exam walking home. It was really nice, quiet neighbourhood, police station 500 yards away if that. And I was jumped. And I thought it was my cousin and it wasn't. It was an African man, but I've always had this fight or flight. And I was a bit like, he said, like I must've been wearing some rings and he said, "Give me your rings." And he'd already grabbed something. I think I was wearing a chain and he grabbed it and I looked at him. I assessed very quickly my surroundings. I was on the top of my street. To my left just across the road was my aunt's house. And within a split second, I'd made the judgement that he wasn't getting it. And I told him, "Okay, step away from me and I'll give it." And then the pretence of giving it, I ran and he didn't follow me.

And I guess that's my kind of personality, is that there's always that drive and being that fighter I think, being quite resilient. And then the narrative changed and I can't remember when it changed, but it changed to Muslims being the villains in the media. And it's interesting because my dissertation, I wrote in 1994, I graduated. No, that's not right. 87, 92, 97 I graduated. But there was already that perception of Muslims being villains in the media and not being enough coverage. We grew up in a time where I never saw somebody like me in books. I never saw somebody like me on TV. It's different now. And we were never the main character in any narrative. And then I guess from, I did my postgraduate from 98 to 99, and then 9-11 happened my first year of teaching, possibly. And then...

First year of teaching possibly. And then, so from my early twenties-ish, you've spent your life justifying being a Muslim. And often I find a particularly, I know the whole purpose of this interview is to look at my experience of being Muslim, I guess in Oxford. I've often felt that I'm a spokesperson for the billions of Muslims around the world, which is really tough because I'm one person and yes, I'm a practising Muslim, but to look at me, you won't necessarily make that judgement because I don't wear hijab. But particularly where I live in Oxford, which is it's a village on the outskirts of the city of Oxford. We're in 2024 and I still come across so many people who have never met a Muslim or never engaged with a Muslim. We performed Umrah this December, so December 2023. And I was talking to my daughter's, my daughter plays adult hockey as well as junior hockey, her captain. And I said, oh, we've just returned from performing pilgrimage. And she'd never heard of Saudi Arabia being the home to Muslims. And that's quite profound.

And I think that epitomises how I sometimes feel as a Muslim in Oxford or in Oxfordshire, should we say in the county. If we fast-forward my career. So I became a teacher. I did my postgraduate in Nottingham, and that was a great experience. I really immersed in what I was doing there. So while I made some friends, predominantly my friends were on my course, I was the only Muslim girl on my course. And it was quite a big, if you think about postgraduate courses, my specialism was English, secondary English, but you've got the whole range there. I remember myself as being the only Muslim, there was a Muslim boy from Sheffield who was also studying English, but we would have joint lectures with everybody on the course.

And I don't remember there being another Muslim or Pakistani. I didn't really integrate with the wider university experience. I know people have ISOC nowadays, and there probably was one then, but I didn't connect maybe a little bit because I was a postgraduate student and not an undergraduate student. And maybe now in hindsight, if I look back, I probably would've tried to unpick that a little bit. But we were there, we were in school placement, so it was like sometimes it was working full time and then you do a dissertation and then you leave basically. So I had two really good experiences at my schools, very driven by what I could find as opposed to what the school's provided. So you go into a school and then it share your resources with you and you've got to do everything from scratch and you're training to be a teacher, but you've got to figure it all out. And it felt very natural. It all came quite naturally to me.

I then taught in Redbridge in London, academically, very successful school called Seven Kings High School. You entered these pools within boroughs. So I went for an interview in Redbridge and the head teacher liked me. They invited me for an interview and I got offered the job. And it was a really good experience. It was very culturally diverse. So very different from my Nottingham school experience. Pakistanis, Indians, some African children, Caucasian children as well. But everybody had one goal in common and that they all wanted to succeed academically and they came from very socioeconomically diverse backgrounds, generally quite

working class backgrounds, but everybody wanted to succeed. So I had really good, happy few years there doing my thing. I was one of two Asian teachers at the school at that time. No, that's probably not true. Maybe there were one or two more, but it wasn't as diverse as the student body. And there was an Urdu teacher, Pakistani lady, but she taught Urdu.

And I don't even know if she was valued in the same way as other staff were because of the subject she were teaching. But I had really good experience. Kids were lovely. I am still in touch with some of the students that I taught because I was maybe three, four years older than them when I started teaching. So I was 22 when I started teaching, 23. Often used to get asked if I was an undercover six former. So that was good fun. And then I'd met my husband, I knew he wanted to move back to Oxford, so it meant I was going to be moving to Oxford. I thought I need to find a job. And I got a job as a teaching and learning consultant, which was huge step career-wise. And I always felt, and I don't know whether it was being female Muslim, you used to have to work harder to prove yourself. People make assumptions about you.

And I remember coming for the interview and there was a Caucasian man older than me, very confident talking about how he's going to get the job. And I'm just sat there just thinking, okay, I'll give it my best. And actually he didn't get the job and I got the job and that was a good learning experience. And I did consultancy for about 11, 12 years in Oxfordshire. Got to know the community quite well. But I was, I don't know, each, when the Labour government were in power, they had education, teaching and learning consultants, that was a way to improve school improvement. And they were everywhere. And I was one of these and we were told, you are top 1% of your profession, et cetera. I was part of the southeast, so in Oxfordshire, you're part of the southeast of England. I was the only non-White consultant. So I spent a lot of my career navigating myself as the only non-White person. Many females, mostly female consultants, but from middle class White backgrounds.

So all of a sudden you've got very different experiences that you are bringing. And I remember once attending the London training, it was joint with the consultants of London. And it blew my mind how diverse it was. And I sat there thinking, gosh, the experience that I'm having here is so different to the London. Made me wish I was part of the London consultants because it was just ethnically diverse, but just diverse in terms of ages, backgrounds, classes, and felt more where I would feel at home than here. But I was living in Oxfordshire and I enjoyed my job, worked hard at it.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:48:04]

Aleena Din:

Well, I asked this question before, but I'll ask it again in the context of this work, what does that do to your sense of self as a racialized minority person, as a Muslim day in day out, having to navigate a largely White environment.

Munaza:

Sometimes it can be really exhausting because you are constantly talking about your differences. But to be fair, the people I was working with, you would focus on work. So whilst I would fast, they were really supportive. And if I needed to pray and if I wanted to pray and I felt confident enough to pray, I could pray. Those adjustments were made. Sometimes they weren't. I remember having to deliver a whole day's worth of teacher training to teaching assistants. So we used to induct teaching assistants whilst fasting, but that wasn't factored in that actually I can't have any water. But equally, I am aware that as a Muslim, I want to present the best possible picture of what it means to be Muslim and therefore these sacrifices are fine and we can still function.

And almost a lot of the time I felt like I was trying to do was to prove to them actually that I'm not going to pass out. I'm not going to perform any less. Well then you are because it's like, well, how can you perform? You're fasting. You've not had any water or food, your mind's not going to be clear. And for me it was always a challenge to say, actually I could do my job just as well. So okay, I lost my voice by the end of the session, but the content was still good, the feedback was still good, so it was fine. I think I'm finding that more for you get used to being the odd one out per se. So you go to places and you are asking for halal food or maybe the way you're going to dress is going to be more modest. But I'm consciously aware that these are choices that I've made and there wasn't ever an issue if I needed time off for Eid or et cetera, then that was fine.

I think the bigger problem I find at the moment, if we're thinking about Muslim and communities is that we are so far behind London. So I left London in 2003, both in terms of the quality of education, the way we were teaching was so much more dynamic in London, the things I was doing, I'm still not necessarily seeing all of that in schools here. But equally also just integrating all children, all values into school life. My children are experiencing things that I experienced at school, which you feel actually I didn't think that that would happen. So I'll give you an example. My daughter's local secondary school, I did some work there. Two years ago I said to the head teacher, oh, it's Ramadan and you've not mentioned anything in your staff news bulletin.

You mentioned Easter, and it was the same time that Easter was falling. And he said, well, if you feel that you want to share anything, you can contact my PA. Which defeats the object of what I was trying to actually is that it needs to be part of your community, not mine, your community. You are leading this school, it's part of your vision, your strategy, your ethos, your values, et cetera. They don't have a prayer room, they don't think it's important while children are fasting to create that space for them. And whereas other schools perhaps are making those provisions. Last year for the first time they had a cultural day. Amazing. You think it's amazing? When did they plan it? For the first day of Ramadan. Defeats the object of what you're trying to do. So you've got all this amazing food that kids can taste, but you've got, even if it's just one person in your school community that can't have it, that should have been factored in.

And I think there's still a lot of work to do within the bigger community, not just the Muslim community. It's a wider context of how you can integrate being a Muslim. And I often find myself, I think my contribution in terms of what I bring as a Muslim in Oxfordshire has been that it's going into those places where they aren't familiar with Islam, they're not familiar with what it means to be Muslim. And I want to make it easier for those children and make it more accessible. And I think that's where I've seen my roots into being a Muslim within Oxfordshire.

Aleena Din:

Is that a pressurised position to be put in?

Munaza:

I've chosen to put myself in it. So my children go to Horsepath, went to Horsepath Primary School, it's a small village school of a 140. I was chair of [inaudible 01:01:11] for about nine years. And well, sometimes it's frustrating because there's other parents who should be doing the same, they're not doing the same. So I feel, okay, I'll do it because if it helps my children and it helps other children and it changes the way people are then brilliant. So an example is in lockdown again, it was Eid and the head teacher was doing live meetings and assemblies and newsletters were going out. There was no mention of Ramadan, there was no mention of Eid. I grew up at a point, we talk about identity, where I would take parts of me. So I would take a part of me to school, I would take a part of me to my family and it's when can you bring your whole self?

And it's trying to encourage our children now to be their whole self in any given context. And whilst that's not always possible, you want to make it accessible for them without them thinking, oh, I don't want to be different. And I still feel that they are where I was 30 years ago, that if they do, they will stand out even more. And no 13, 14, 15-year-old, the majority unfortunately don't want to stand out and being seen as being

different. So I contacted the head teacher, I shared a really nice Eid book with her, she read it out. I offered for my daughters to write a little bit about what Ramadan means to them. And then they shared it, but then it didn't happen the following year. So if you're thinking about making long-lasting changes, it's got to be integrated into schools. And I feel that that's where I potentially should, can maybe evaluate how I could be more effective in making that happen because I feel it doesn't happen enough.

Aleena Din:

And you think this is specific to Oxford?

Munaza:

It's specific to my experiences of Oxfordshire. I don't think it's a unique thing because I think there are things happening at the moment which have become apparent aren't just specific to being in a less diverse, less multicultural area. But I do think when you have a staffing body who are all Caucasian middle class, they're generally not going to have that awareness or realise there's a need. So I think the Oxford City schools handle curriculum much better than this local primary school, for example, and I have spoken to the head about, they're studying World War at the moment, World War II, and I've said all your books focus on Caucasian characters and you're looking at books that were written 50, 60 years ago, you need to be bringing in more diversity. So I've got a book called the Grand Mosque of Paris, which looks at how Muslims help Jewish people in World War II.

So I've suggested my daughter takes that into school and it's having those conversations, but they aren't happening at a strategic level. And I think, yeah, just from my experience and just being in education, they are, I guess my personal struggles.

Aleena Din:

That's fascinating. I guess maybe zooming out a little bit, and thinking more widely about your experiences being Muslim in Oxford, where you've described the real difficulty in work and in your children's education, navigating these maybe less diverse spaces, what has it been like navigating the other side of that, a Muslim community, particularly places like East Oxford and they have that beautiful huge mosque. How has it been for you, particularly living in the outskirts of Oxford, being part of that community?

Munaza:

Yeah, I think there are some amazing initiatives that are trying to bring together Muslim communities and are ample workshops and groups that my children we could all be a part of. So you've got, there's a lady in Oxford who started something called the Mini Muslim Club and my eldest, who's now 19, went to it and graduated from it. And that was once a week on a Saturday for a couple of hours they would learn about Islam. It was done in a really fun, interactive way. They would learn about the fundamentals of praying and reading Quran in terms of reciting some surahs but not being taught Quran. It was more about what it means to be a Muslim and the history of Islam, which was really good.

There's another trust called the Belaya Trust they've set up, and I don't know if you're familiar with them, but they're doing excellent work and there are lots of other various startups like that which enable the Muslims in Oxford to come together as a community. And there's a lot of reverts in Oxfordshire or in Oxford. So there's a big focus in Reverts integrating into what it means to be Muslim. So you've got big Pakistani community here. I think that's separate. And then I think you've got a good academic base for a Muslim community and a lot of the people who are driving these initiatives, a link to academia in some way.

And I think Inadvertently that is hopefully increasing the aspirations of Muslims within our community moving away from, so you've still got a lot of first-generation, my children are second-generation Pakistanis here. You've still got a lot of first-generation Pakistanis in Oxford, particularly in the city. And their

experiences are probably like the experiences I describe of myself growing up and maybe of my peers who I never really connected with, where they're limited in what they can access and what is deemed okay for them to access. So it's a good place for my children to be in the wider context of a Muslim community. I think within an education context it's still quite dated where we are.

Aleena Din:

And does that also apply to, I guess more traditional forms of religious education? Like the ones you had, for example, of going to someone's house and learning grants? Does that exist?

Munaza:

Yeah. So you still have Mosque lessons and my eldest did go for Mosque lessons and maybe I'm slightly prejudiced in my experiences, but it wasn't a good experience for him. And I took him out of it and they learned with a local Imam. They were having face-to-face lessons with him on a weekly, twice weekly basis. And now it's online. He's abroad at the moment anyway, but then with COVID it all became online and that works much better for them I think. We've got extended family in Oxford as well. So you've got that kind of Muslim/ Pakistani connection as well, which you can go Mosque with your cousins and that's really nice for the boys. I'm going to read Jum'ah with my cousin, et cetera. So it becomes more social. One of my sons is at a school in the city of Oxford. It's an independent school, but it's in the city. He has access to the mosque and often he's going to the Bengali Mosque to pray Jum'ah because it's closer to his school.

And I love that because it's not just about culturally holding onto your religion, it's your religion. And it's breaking down those cultural boundaries. I think that sometimes limit your experiences and your understanding I think. So that's really good. And he's now, he's 16 and he's connecting with some Muslims in a way where they're, I think is trying to establish their identity as what it means to be Muslim in the wider context as well, which I think is quite nice. So I'm trying to support that development as well.

Aleena Din:

Yeah. There seems to be an incredible generational change when it comes to Islamic education, Muslim identity. How has your identity shifted and changed as you've come to Oxford over time? You said before that you began praying five times a day when you went to university. As you got older and moved to a place like Oxford, have you noticed any shifts or changes in how you practise your religion?

Munaza:

No, I think that comes more from growing older on your self-awareness and self-reflection in that growth. And that to me is very personal and therefore there are wider circles that I could be a part of that will support that growth. But I think perhaps circumstances and where having, being a mum to four children and the busyness that brings, that's quite a individual journey that I take or that I'm on. And actually, for me, the bigger part is helping my children and my family grow up being comfortable with being Muslim, because I think that's the biggest thing is they're so scared of being different and it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. And actually saying, no, it does matter. And trying to give them that confidence.

But I'll be honest, look, I spend a lot of my time on cricket pitches and I still am not comfortable to pull out a prayer mat and pray on the side of a pitch. And that's potentially to do with my wider community at that point where I would be the only one doing that. It shouldn't matter. I know it shouldn't matter, but it does make a difference to me.

Aleena Din:

Yeah.

Munaza:

Yeah.

Aleena Din:

And do you think that your decisions, when it comes to, I guess pulling out a primat publicly in those circles, where do you think that feeling comes from? Is it an awareness that maybe the people around you aren't...

Comes from, is it an awareness that maybe the people around you aren't necessarily educated in why you are deciding to pray? Is it a personal-

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:12:04]

Munaza:

I think it's a bit of both. It's probably some insecurity on some level or it's connecting with Islam at different levels, and when you get to the higher level, it's between you and God and everything else is irrelevant. And I think that's my own journey that I'm on, I often contemplate wearing hijab and I often question what stops me, do I feel uncomfortable? Sometimes you feel suffocated. It's that whole getting used to wearing an extra layer, etc. But again, that's a personal journey and yeah, without shadow of a doubt, I think my environment does influence that because if I went to Umrah, it was easy to wear a hijab every day. You come here and it's that suddenly I'm too in tune with being different and I guess there is that little bit of insecurity.

Aleena Din:

Right. And I guess this maybe leads on to my next question, which is very broad, so please do answer it in any way you want. What does it mean to be Muslim in the UK in 2024? You've mentioned your children's experiences being quite different to yours. What do you see the future looks like for whether it's a Muslim community in Oxford or Muslims in the UK?

Munaza:

I could talk for hours. I'm trying to synthesise what I feel, the key points within what you've just asked. I think ideally it would be not having to justify your beliefs and not being prejudged. There's too much misinformation in the media, mainstream media, and people generally don't have the awareness and the education and the exposure to what it means to be Muslim or associate with Muslims. So I've already mentioned for a lot of the people that I interact with, I might be the only experience of engaging with a Muslim person. So I feel a lot of pressure a lot of the time in having to model all the characteristics that come with being Muslim, the virtuous, the upholding, the mannerisms, those expectations. I feel sometimes there's a lot of pressure because they may not engage with another Muslim or the other Muslim they engage with will look very different. So it's that balance between being true to yourself and being aware that you are spreading a bigger message.

At the moment, it's hard and I think it's particularly hard with everything that's happening in Palestine and how I feel about it and how I felt about it for a long time. And a large part of it does for me personally come with being a Muslim. And I have found generally the people that engage with me in my community are Muslim. I've had a few friends talk to me about it. I've had lots of people not say anything, and I just think, "Wow, when something's so in the news, people choosing not to talk to me about it." I wear a badge. I've got one on my coat that I picked up on one of the marches and I had a really interesting conversation with

somebody I don't really know particularly well about it. And I think that that was a conscious decision to wear a badge because I want people to be able to ask me questions. I don't want to be targeted, but I want to open up that healthy discussion.

My daughter's primary school have been really good, but again, I had to contact the head and say, "What are your plans and how are you going to address this? You've done a great job at addressing issues in the past with Ukraine and we had all these fundraisers and children wearing blue and yellow, et cetera." And she was great in how she received it, asked for my input. I drew her attention to the fact that my children have been to marches and would she like my youngest who was eight at the time, to come and talk about her experience of going on a march. And it was welcoming in an educational manner. There weren't any preconceptions about what it means to going to marches. This was at the time of Suella Braverman in the news gaslighting these marches being anti-hate marches. And it was wonderful because my youngest was able to go to school, she'd written a paragraph and she read it as it had been written. It wasn't adapted at all.

Whereas my local secondary school that I've tried to engage with have entertained me in communication with the head teacher, but haven't done anything. And this primary school has also just recently had a fundraiser non-uniform day, and children were asked to come in the colours of the Palestinian flag, which is massive progress and it wasn't initiated by me. And that was really nice. Really nice.

Aleena Din:

It seems often in describing your experiences, you are coming against gatekeepers, whether that's at school, your children's schools, whether that's in other institutions, work. What you've described when it comes to the conflict, what's happening in Palestine, the politics of that and how it's been received differently by different schools, thinking more broadly about the politics of being Muslim, of Islamophobia, do you think that the political response to that has changed enough over time, has changed significantly over time?

Munaza:

Do you mean the broader political response of our country?

Aleena Din:

The broader political, yeah.

Munaza:

I mean it's become a lot more hostile, I feel. But equally I think, I am no expert, but I think equally with the access to social media, with people actually sharing their personal experiences, we engage much better as human beings, don't we, with someone's personal story. So if I'm talking about a topic, if I could bring in a personal experience, I'll draw you in. So we can use empathy. I think people are learning. I think there's a lot of unlearning happening as well at the moment in our community. So my context in Oxfordshire is that obviously I'm a Muslim in Oxfordshire. My professional life has been in education and I've worked in almost all of the state secondary schools in the county. I work with one of the education trusts in the county as well with my experience of being a governor and being a consultant in education, my link in sports is quite key in that I sit on the committee at my local cricket club. I'm the only...

We've just recently, she's going to attend her first meeting, she'll be the second non-white board member. And at one point, I mean, I am the only South Asian or Muslim person on the board. Interestingly, the cricket club has lots of members who are Muslim and South Asian and other diverse backgrounds. But I don't know if they don't want to be or they don't feel that there's a need for them or they haven't got the time or they are unwilling to give up their time to be at a level where they can implement change. I sit on the Oxfordshire Cricket Board for that reason too. So I was invited to join that board, particularly in light of everything that happened with the cricketer in Yorkshire. And there's a lack of diversity and my background of state school

experience and the inequalities between state school and independent schools, but equally of trying to draw in women from other communities to become more active.

And we had an incident recently where there'd been an Islam-phobic comment made, that player is no longer playing for Oxfordshire. But I felt that was quite personal to me because of my experiences and perhaps other board members wouldn't have been quite so in tune had I not been on the board to really bring it together and explain the context of why something like that isn't just banter and it's moving away from those incidents as banter.

Aleena Din:

Yeah. And I guess speaking to the need to have a diversity of people, whether it's gender, race, religion, on these committees.

Munaza:

Yeah, absolutely.

Aleena Din:

And do you see that being reflected in your local politics as well?

Munaza:

Yes. Yeah, it's weird where I live because whilst I am five minute drive from the city of Oxford, my constituency is actually Henley and it's a conservative member of parliament who wins every year. So I have to vote tactically. So since I've lived here in Horspath 10 years almost, I used to vote Labour and I think that was a very Pakistani thing growing up in London. We felt that it was a working class representing the minorities. I vote liberal democrats here because voting Labour won't serve any purpose. They're not ever going to win an election and my values don't align with the conservative party's values. But there's a young Pakistani girl whose part of the Labour group in Oxford. She's a lawyer and she's very keen to bring on board what minority groups, particularly Pakistanis, feel in the community. We've had a few members, MPs or Councillors step down recently because they felt that local government politics and the country's politics weren't necessarily aligning with their values, particularly on Gaza and Palestine, and I fully support that.

Aleena Din:

I'm conscious of time and coming towards the end of this interview. Is there anything that you would like to mention in reference to your experiences as a Muslim in Oxford that hasn't been mentioned already?

Munaza:

Yeah, one thing that I've not spoken about, and for the last six years, it's been a big part of my return to sports, is along with another lady, another Pakistani lady and another mum, we set up a Horspath cricket women's team. And it's hard work because I basically have to drive it and it's exhausting, but it's a really good example of encouraging women from all communities, but particularly because I have an understanding of the limitations and the challenges that come from women playing sport in our Pakistani communities, really trying to encourage women who otherwise wouldn't be playing any sports to come out and publicly play proper league matches and be part of community that they perhaps wouldn't have done so otherwise. And that's really nice. I am hoping that it can grow and it's something that we can encourage more and more people, girls particularly, to become a part of, who won't get the opportunity to play sports otherwise.

But I feel that as a Muslim in this county, that to me personally has been really important and that representation to show that as a Muslim woman, I can play sports and whilst I didn't have the opportunities

while I was younger and I'm not claiming to be an elite level, it's okay at a recreational level to come and give it a go and to just encourage women from all backgrounds to be a part of that community.

Aleena Din:

So interesting.

Munaza:

And that's where I met Priya.

Aleena Din:

Right.

Munaza:

Yeah.

Aleena Din:

And have you noticed an uptake in people maybe creating and accessing those types of spaces, whereas before, I mean doing research on Pakistani communities and Muslim communities across the country, you have the mosque, where is a good place to meet Muslims, you have Pakistani associations and so on, but it seems like in Oxford there's newly emerging spaces. How popular are those spaces and do you see them growing in the future?

Munaza:

I think their awareness is growing. And I know for example, sitting on Oxford Cricket Board as a non-executive director that there's an awareness and there's funding coming in to help grow those spaces. But I think sometimes it's not just about identifying the problem, it's about having the right people there to be able to fully understand how you can grow those places and to get the people comfortable to come and attend. So there's lots of street cricket happening here and you have a lot of South Asian community, but boys, not girls, coming. It's not targeted at boys, but where are the girls? I know in Banbury, Oxford Cricket are working with the local mosques to try and have girls-only sessions. So they've identified that that community feels comfortable with female coaches. So there's a gap and that gap is being identified and it's being addressed and hopefully that will see an increase and hopefully longer term it will see a change in people's views that it doesn't have to... My daughter can play cricket and it doesn't have to be with females only and it doesn't have to be led by female coaches only. And just breaking down those cultural barriers probably that prohibit a lot of this from.

Aleena Din:

Right. It's fascinating to hear that there is engagement happening with mosques. I mean, just thinking about engagement, obviously this is a University of Oxford project and I think it's maybe difficult to think about Oxford's local history without then thinking about the university. As someone who's lived here for a while now, has the university in any way forged relations with, whether that's the South Asian community or the Muslim community, and do you see students engaging in those clubs or accessing those spaces?

Munaza:

From my experience, I would probably say, I'm not sure. I know that there are outreach programmes, and I know these outreach programmes target different groups, but I think possibly just because it's Oxford University and it's for high achievers, they would potentially be targeting those high achievers within these communities as opposed to opening the space and creating those opportunities for everyone. But they do have open... Once a year, there's an open doors weekend, so anybody can go into these spaces. Whether it's advertised or how people find out about it is perhaps questionable. But yeah, I mean that's my limited knowledge in that, and I think that there is some awareness and there are some initiatives, but perhaps in terms of broadening that and making it more inclusive to help increase those aspirations, maybe they need to start working with younger children and making your communities feel a part of your institution, which I don't think they do. I think Oxford University... And it's hard here, but not like Cambridge where you can see the colleges that open. These are all behind big closed doors generally.

Aleena Din:

Yeah, it's fascinating coming from the outside in to a city like Oxford and realising that there's such a divide between people who live in the city and people who study at the university.

Munaza:

I know the Oxford Homeless Project did an initiative with... But I think it was the ISOC again at Oxford University, and they had a Ramadan Iftar together and they helped organise it. But that's coming from a specific group as opposed to the wider university.

Aleena Din:

And I guess my last question for now, I guess you've worked in education, from what I know, history in particular has a remit to teach local history, and then you have the university and the community history initiative trying to generate that local history. How effective has that been in maybe teaching your children about Oxford's local history and more specifically about the diversity in Oxford, of people from South Asia and Africa and the Caribbean moving to Oxford, that being a pretty large Muslim community. Do you think the education that they're getting at their schools conveys that?

Munaza:

No.

Aleena Din:

Right.

Munaza:

No. I think you could probably argue that some schools might be more aware and are changing their curriculum content to meet those needs. My children have never had a trip to even their local mosque at our local primary school. So therefore I think that's probably a really good key area. And often if you look back at history, you're looking at generations ago where South Asians were probably not a part of this community. And yeah, you're trailing your family tree and you're asking children to go and explore that. And that unfortunately then eliminates us and our children from having a sense of belonging to our home. Because we

have a family tree, it's online on Tribal Pages, my cousin started it about 10 years ago, and we can't trace beyond maybe knowing the name of my great-grandparent, grandfather or grandmother.

We've lost all of that heritage. And it's really sad because you often then feel this sense of incompleteness, whereas people perhaps who have had generations here can trace their family history back many, many generations and we can probably go back two generations at best. So I think what the work you are doing is quite key in not just helping people to perhaps unpick their connection and what they can bring to a community, but in what you're doing in preserving the work that has gone on and perhaps to raise awareness of how there are all these initiatives, but perhaps people just don't know about them and to bring all of it together, almost like a jigsaw puzzle, the pieces fitting in together. So I think it would be really exciting.

Aleena Din:

Yeah. Well great. Thank you. I think we're, yeah.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:34:13]