**2018\_esch\_GrOG\_09**

Name of interviewee: Unmesh Desai

Project: Growing Old Gracefully - SubCo

Date of interview: 29/06/2018

Language: English

Venue: City Hall, London

Name of interviewer: Francis Ball

Length of interview: 41:55

Transcribed by: James King

-----------

**Okay, so it’s Friday the twenty ninth of June and I’m interviewing Unmesh Desai at City Hall as part of the SubCo project. Could you tell me your date of birth please Unmesh?**

Erm, ninth of May nineteen fifty nine.

**And where were you born?**

In East Africa; Tanga, Tanzania. What used to be known as Tanganyika.

**And presumably your family lived there at that time?**

My parents originated from India. Erm, my grandfather moved to East Africa during the days of empire in 1945 and my father followed in the fifties, and that’s where I was born.

**What, what erm work did your parents and grandparents do?**

My- they were teachers.

**Teachers… And, I mean there was a well-established Indian community in East Africa at that time wasn’t there?**

Very well, I mean trade between erm, what err then was known as the Indian subcontinent, XXX (00.51) err Arabia and the East African coast had been going for hundreds of years. Erm, but erm late nineteenth century the first great real migration in numbers err, people who went to build erm, Great East African Railway, from Mombasa to, into Uganda. Err, traders, shopkeepers, small scale businesses, businessmen – err but post-1945 you had another great real migration to the East African countries Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania – of course there was migration to Zambia, South Africa as well – but err, the second wave of migration post-45 were people more to do with erm, the civil service, the administrative classes, err people like my fath- my grandfather, my father were teachers. And so the nature of migration was different.

**Yeah. And how long did you live in East African before-?**

Err, about fifteen years.

**Fifteen years.**

I spent a year in India, but I came here when I was sixteen.

**Mhmm. Err, what was it like growing up err, in Africa?**

Well for me it was a great experience because erm, erm, all the liberation movements err that fought for liberation for South Africa, Rhodesia as it then was known, erm Mozambique, erm Angola – they were all based in Tanzania. Tanzania was at the front line.

**Wow.**

Err, and President Julius Nyerere erm, was the greatest ever world leader and statesman in my opinion. For a country who was so poor err, without much help from, from erm, erm much more powerful and richer countries, erm bore the brunt of all the liberation movements in erm, in what was er really third world err, really developing country. So I still remember at school err Samora Michel, President erm, leader of FRELIMO – err, who was assassinated by err the Portuguese, erm colonial establishment – coming to my school and err, he spoke in Portuguese, didn’t understand a word obviously, err I still remember his last few words: ‘a luta continua’, meaning that ‘our mission continues’. Erm, so that was really inspiring.

**Yeah that sounds, that sounds very interesting.**

Yes and that’s what shaped my politics I think in my radicalism.

**Yeah, excellent. Erm, so then what caused you to move, your family to move to England?**

Well the history of the empire. The East African Asians – when erm, East African countries got independence, err they were all British citizens, and they were offered the choice to either come here to the mother country, or to stay in erm, Tanzania, East Africa – which was going through the process of Africanisation, quite understandably and quite rightly – erm, and erm so that’s our way in here.

**You mentioned the national liberation movements and the process of Africanisation, could you maybe say a bit more about your sort of feelings towards that, because obviously it’s a process that saw you leave the country you were brought up in?**

Well erm, the choice was really clear to people, feel welcome to help build erm, modernist Africa as we now know it, and Tanzaniasation, Africanisation, whatever you want to call it was about actually making err, ensuring that all section of er life erm, were given a chance to be a part in the making of modern err, Tanzania, modern East Africa. Err, and very specifically the indigenous African population had been left behind for various reasons, erm you know the way that erm institutional structures operated and so on. Erm, but err the certainly wasn’t erm in the case of Tanzania any anti- Asian sentiment or mood. Tanzania Asian citizens were very welcome to be a part in the development of erm, of the modern Tazania – in that sense Nyerere was a great believer in equality erm, fighting err tribalism, corruption – err, a vision of Tanzania where all races, religion, tribes co-existed in harmony.

**Yeah.**

Erm, so yeah, it was a err, the political processes that followed independence were, you know, there was a need clearly, educational opportunities, job opportunities and so on, had been denied to, for various reasons for long to the indigenous communities, and, so this was more and more to, to bring all sections of Tanzania’s society erm, to set them up on equal footing.

**Mm. Erm, a lot of other people I’ve interviewed with talks about the context of this sort of political idea of blackness, sort of in the seventies through to the nineties, and how that was quite a broad movement that contained Asian and Caribbean people, do you think the colonial context in which you’re brought up in shaped that for many people?**

It err, undoubtedly now I’m thinking back on it, it played a part. Erm, then XXX (06.22) moments, erm then decolonial moments, the er ‘Wind of Change’ that Harold McMillan talked about in the late fifties – I was privileged and lucky enough to be born erm, around that time. And obviously I was very young, as I said, my encounter with Samora Michel, who’d have been the first President of independent of Mozambique if he had lived, was a defining erm influence in my life. And then coming to England I got drawn into the anti-racist, anti-fascist movement. Erm, if you look at London people forget at the 1977 GLC elections the National Front were the third biggest party in London they had a hundred thousand voters. And err, racist attacks in East London and elsewhere erm, and err fascist marches, fascist activity, err Mrs. Thatcher coming out with her err talk about people feeling swamped by an alien culture – err very hostile media-led campaign against people like the Malawi, a family from Malawi for instance being put up allegedly in a five-star hotel near Gatwick airport – that made the front page of The Sun, very, some vicious headlines. And so there was this hysteria – a climate of, of fear, of suspicion err, which in turn queued support for far-right wing parties like the National Front. And so I got drawn into anti-fascist movement, and inevitably you then exp- you saw racism manifest itself in many other forms, institutional racism from the councils, err the, erm Black Britons, or Asian Britons access to housing or direct racism from the police, err little institutional racism, and so blackness was a political colour. It wasn’t about any form of nationalism and it certainly wasn’t anti-white. Erm, black politics err was for us erm, identifying a commonality err so black was a political colour no matter what part of the empire you came from, no matter what skin pigmentation, it was developing the consciousness that we face the same issues and working with white-working class, with white anti-racists erm, of whom there were many thousands, many brave people, many, you know, inspiring people, many dedicated people. Err, so it certainly wasn’t separatism or exclusionary politics - nothing to do with black power or anything like that. It was more an attempt to define, define a political identity.

**Umm, that’s something that I certainly want to touch more on, but do you mind if we just backtrack to sort of your early experiences having moved to England, so presumably your family settled in London?**

Well initially in Yorkshire, my father er found it hard to get a job there, my mother found work in a factory er, which is where many Asian women were employed, erm so they moved to London. And then after living in a city, I got a job working in the East End for a group monitoring racist attacks, police harassment, police malpractices, combatting fascist activity, and erm that’s where I learned my real politics; the politics of people, be with people all the time learn from the people and communities around you. Erm, and er amongst many other things we set up the country’s first 24 racial harassment hotline. So yes, very heady days: inspiring days. Um, it was very different in East London, the docks had closed down, um, communities were disorientated, they were seeing East London change around them, er and so there was a feeling of resentment, local councils were seen to be uncaring. Not just seen to be, they were uncaring in many ways. Erm, err although again, there were many good individual councillors, but councils were seen as remote, er local Labour parties were either detached from people’s lives or certainly not represent the new, the new communities that were growing up in east London – and so there were many matters both within the Labour party to transform it and in communities to get councils to take erm, these issues seriously. And erm, for me it was a great political education.

**Yeah. Were there any campaigns or specific moments you can remember taking part in-**

Well I was organiser and secretary of some of the more prominent campaigns er of the day, the Newham Seven and the Newham Eight, who happened to be, in the first case seven young Asians arrested for defending themselves against racist attacks and charged with conspiracy laws, err under conspiracy laws. The Newham Eight were similarly eight young Asians charged at a local school for defending themselves against racist attacks. Err and I must say that although I said an organiser, I was part of a mass movement of many people whose contributions have not been recognised and who preceded me in the struggle against racism in East London, from the mid-70s when I was still at school err, in Yorkshire. So erm, the marches, you know, thousands, er they were also campaigns for the Bradford Twelve campaign, Asian movements in the north of England, all on the same issues of racist attacks, fighting institutional racism, police neglect or hostility. Umm, it was a different country. And our job was to, not just combat fascism and racist activity, but to show in practice that communities in East London and elsewhere had more in common than divided them. And erm, what is happening as a result of er the decline of traditional industries led to many white people feeling alienated from local civic processes, was to see how we could form common erm, bonds. Err, fascism wasn’t the answer, but fascism comes in when progress movements don’t give an answer. Err, people are not born racist, they develop racist attitudes for various reasons: social economic factors and so on. Err, and the job of radicals, the job of progress, the job of socialists, which I am, is to see how to overcome such divisions and unite people around err, substantive issues of housing or jobs or whatever.

**Yeah. Erm, were there differences between anti-racist movements and the Asian communities as a whole in the north of England and London that you noticed?**

Well, sorry if I get the drift of your question correctly: no, because the movements came out from the communities. Er, there was an organic link. They were not like some sections of erm, the left that parachuted into err communities and organised marches or, or created campaigns that were not rooted in the localities, they were not rooted in the communities that experienced issues first hand.

**But I mean also, were there different issues that were being confronted in the north and London or were they broadly similar experiences?**

Well you could argue bigger sharpness of racism, but I’d say no, the, organic racism, I’d say no. What Tower Hamlets, the community in Tower Hamlets went through around Brick Lane, numerous racist attacks documented in a pamphlet called Blood In The Streets, by the Reverend Kenneth Leech, the Bishop of Step- yeah, from the diocese of Stepney; erm, Ken tells them about workers came out on strike and marched in pouring rain to Downing Street to protest against the murder of err, Altab Ali. Erm, so there was racism but there was also resistance.

**What did your work involve as an organiser in these campaigns?**

Well basically umm, err making sure that erm, people around the country knew what was going on in East London, publicising the issues, turning unusual cases into campaigns, which identified the issues that needed to be tackled. Err, like anti-racist education and so on. Councils develop policies to combat racial harassment err, it involved organising with the local community for demonstrations outside the court, marches, speaking to school children, speaking to colleges, speaking to the trade unions, speaking to Labour parties, erm directly people from the inertia of this movement around you.

**Mm. Was it- you mentioned ten thousand people coming out to march, was it easy to mobilise community support for these?**

Indeed, because people saw it as going on around them, and people only come out, they are not manipulated; they only come out if they know that they are real issues. So when Altab Ali er was murdered in the East Ham High Street North, erm in broad daylight err, I was only a marcher, I didn’t organise a march, this was in 1980, but I remember coming from north west London, massing huge marches, families, mothers, doctors, children, you know, young kids, err elderly- grandparents. Erm, and erm, err people you know, along with as I say, erm hundreds of erm, err, err races umm, white marches as well. Enough is enough and self-defence is no offence and I’m here to stay, here to fight – were the more prominent slogans of the time.

**Yeah. You mentioned the Newham Seven being charged with conspiracy laws – could you explain a bit more about what they were and how they affected the broader black community?**

Well, erm, err as I recall it there was a pub that was frequented by some local racists er, and there was an altercation between them and some Asian youths. There had been some racist attacks in the lead up to the incident, err, and in the fracas that developed the police arrested seven erm young Asian youths, err and they were on trial at the Old Bailey. Err and again issues were of racist attacks, self-defence and attempts to criminalise self-defence.

**Mm. Um, was lots of the work directed at the justice system or were there other sort of angles that you took to-**

Well, to be honest err, we were living at a time when, when erm the sheer forces of, of, of racism were so direct that I don’t think we had any time to think about wider issues. Err, it was more about protecting communities against racist attacks; attacks were rather publicised, about what's going on, about defending people who were wrongly arrested and criminalised. Err, and er that were putting pressure on the police and the judiciary recognised why these people had done what they’d done. Erm, but the wider issues erm, I’m going to be very frank from memory, we never took on the much wider battles, we were simply caught up with the day to day er task of running a 24 emergency service, helping you know, families that were attacked day in, day out, night in, night out. Um, err so you don’t get the luxury of developing into philosophies or wider strategies [laughs].

**Umm, would you mind telling me a little bit more about the 24 hour hotline? Because that sounds like a pioneering initiative-**

Well err, it was modelled on erm, on err on what Release were doing. Release were a drugs advice agency, and it was a community based service where about fifty people signed up, received training, and the idea was that erm, when the official- erm, the group that I worked for, the GLC police community, the first monitoring group in the country, umm – to be funded certainly – I think the first was, XXX (18.39) in Tower Hamlets, erm so probably the second, but erm, err the idea was that the number that we used err was widely advertised and if people were experiencing err, an attack and it was an urgent situation they would ring up that particular number, they’d be directed to whoever was on duty that night, who’d be trained in basic procedures, what to follow, err what to say to the police and so on, and the idea was to get the appropriate agencies, usually the police respond straight away.

**So they’d ring your hotline before the police?**

Well the idea was to do both. Err, I mean depends on the family. If the police were trusted it sadly wasn’t the case in those days, erm and erm the idea was that the hotline would, would pressurise them.

**Yeah. Erm, was this a professional role or a volunteering-**

The people who, who ran the service were all volunteers.

**And, but were you-?**

No, I was a paid worker. I mean, I was coordinator and we were funded by the GLC Police Community.

**So were you, did you join the organisation when it was founded, or-**

No it was found by, by local teachers, people from the local law centre, by some very great individuals who, as I said, sadly didn’t get the recognition they deserved. Remember this was all before Stephen Lawrence. So these people struggled with publicity, in the racial climate, err fantastic people some of them sadly are no longer in this world, umm so the group had been going for two years then they applied for funding, and I was lucky enough to be appointed as their first worker.

**Wow. Umm, how did you, did you just hear about the work they were doing-**

I saw the job advertised in City Limits [laughs].

**Really?**

Just applied. Erm, I was involved in anti-fascist politics anyway, the Anti-Nazi League, erm left-field organisations and so on, erm but err going err to Newham, that’s where I learned my real politics, community politics, err as opposed to learning about socialism from books and erm, from student union, you know, from student union politics.

**Erm, how- would you mind talking a bit about how you first got involved in organising, in a sort of socialist, anti-fascist way? Erm, sort of what, how old were you when you first joined an organisation?**

Err, I suppose erm, well when I was doing my A-levels, erm around seventeen erm, six- sixteen, seventeen. Err, I was at a college in err, sixth form college in Yorkshire, Huddersfield: Huddersfield New College, and we founded this society, a group called Society Defy Discrimination, because the headmaster felt that err, openly denouncing would be too radical. He was a very great headmaster Mr. Graham, erm and err, we produced some literature, err there were some issues at school, so when there was the Queen’s Silver Jubilee, err a student erm, who happened to be of Sikh origin, wrote a letter to the school magazine calling for the abolition of the monarchy and all that, and erm, at the celebration of the Silver Jubilee, the whole class, I kid you not, the whole class wrote a letter to the college paper called Hunch, that if Harjinder does not like our Queen and our country he’s very welcome to go back to the village that he came from.

**Really?**

Those were the exact words.

**Wow.**

[Laughs] I’m not making this up.

**That’s incredible.**

Well it’s incredible in 2018, it wasn’t incredible in 1977.

**No, no.**

[Laughs]

**Erm, you mentioned that you were appointed as the first-**

Yeah.

**-Paid member when-**

Yeah.

**-Funding came in.**

Yeah.

**Was it hard to get funding for these quite radical groups?**

Erm, this is where I think credit has got to be given to the GLC of Ken Livingstone and people like John McDonnell and others, they were a pioneering err council, they opened up whole areas of debate around women’s equality, racial equality, Irish pol- what was going on in Ireland, erm new erm employment erm, err, err issues erm, and it was a breath of fresh air, and credit due where its deserved. Erm, that erm they put their money where their mouths were and funded groups around police monitoring, race err, anti-racist initiatives, erm groups working in the Irish community, women’s groups to raise awareness. But not just that: actually encouraging communities to stand up for themselves and develop solutions to tackle the problems that they faced.

**Mm. What were your relationships like with, err the borough council, so for instance Newham council?**

Well initially I think they regarded us with hostility, erm I remember trying to book a council hall that we were going to pay for, to host a meeting of the Newham Eight campaign, and the council wouldn’t take the booking, until quite a brave, energetic councillor marched into town hall and said what’s wrong with these people’s money, they’re paying for it, and erm, give them the booking. Erm, and erm, err although some of the councillors might be called right-wing Labour, they were sufficiently moved by our campaign to recognise, particularly in housing, around allocation, around racial harassment… So yeah, there were some intense meetings, erm there were times when the council wouldn’t talk to us. Umm, but we started moving with the times, and credit due to some very brave individual councillors from those days who took on the old establishment. Err, our demand was simple. We asked them to recognise what was going on, because if you don’t recognise that racism is a problem, how on earth are you going to develop solutions to deal with the problem? So they were very modest demands, they were not asking for the planet. We were just asking for recognition, and then from that recognition develops strategy.

**Umm, do you- can you identify any sort of, key moments in the struggle for recognition?**

Well, I think the 1984 – was it? – election of the country, err XXX (25.10) of the McDonnell family in err, in Canning Town, I’m trying to think of the name of the road now erm… God, it just skipped me, opposite a pub called the British Flag, which has now become a black church, shows you how East London has changed, just overlooking- Clemence Avenue. I think it was number twenty two, Clemence Avenue. And err, uh Mrs McDonnell and her family had been terrorising local Asian neighbours and they were evicted. The National Front carried out a vigorous campaign, there was a march, we had a counter-demonstration: Fred Jones, the chairman of the housing committee, who many would call right-wing Labour umm, was involved erm, received a lot of harassment at home, and so on. Barry Simons, a very courageous Director of- visionary Director of Housing, had a lot of pressure on him, but they stood firm, and I think that for me was a turning moment. And then we had programmes like Panorama, and… I remember going on BBC News, national news, at that time it was at nine o’clock in the evening, not the ten o’clock. Err, I talked about issues, we had the world press from Zimbabwe, to India, to America, New York Times, everyone covering us.

**Wow. Erm, what was it like to receive that sort of err, international attention?**

Well it all helped, erm, er it wasn’t about us as individuals, it was about getting recognition, the communities having to live under what was virtually a state of siege. Umm, you know, we did a documentary held by the BBC called the Diving Line. The Dividing Line referred to Barking Road, where south of Barking Road was where the National Front erm, almost had their highest polling elections, where a lot of racist attacks were. Again, you say there's a change for lots of reasons, demographic changes and so on. Umm, and so it was a documentary, the media campaigns, and other things that actually lead to err, see a change in attitudes.

**Mm. How long were you at this organisation for?**

Err, well I, err I was a worker there for what two years?

**What did you go on to do afterwards?**

I then worked for erm, Hackney Council researching policing, qualified as a human rights lawyer, worked with a civil rights firm that erm, erm well ran then by Gareth Peirce, erm the XXX (27.29) campaign. So yeah, I mean my, all my work has always been focused in East London.

**Yeah.**

And eventually became a councillor in ’98; representing East Ham Central ward. And the reason I got involved with the council and the Labour party was leadership campaigns about limitations. We need to see those issues in a wider context, and certainly collective action by mainstream equality issues or single issues, and developing strategies in a wider program of change, err and so this type of institution became more active in party politics, and became a councillor, err and erm, I’m not lucky enough to be here at the GLA. I represent an area that actually taught me my real politics, has shaped my life, shaped my politics certainly. Erm my political career started off in Tower Hamlets, my first house in East London was in Tower Hamlets, erm and then I moved to Newham, worked in Newham, so to represent Hackney and Newham, sorry Newham, Tower Hamlets, Barking & Dagenham, where we were involved in many anti-fascist erm, sort of cam- erm, counter-demonstration, erm I couldn’t think to ask of anything more than the privilege of representing an area that has taught me about life, about what you know, what politics should be about.

**Yeah. Could you describe what it was like to go on these counter-demonstrations? I mean it must have been pretty heated presumably?**

Yeah I mean, err certainly you know, you saw the nastiness of fascism; the violence of fascism. Erm, the National Front were the more moderate of the groups: we had the British Movement, the whole Oi! Movement, err the skinhead movement, not all skinheads of course were fascists, or supporters of fascists groups, but certainly the skinhead movement was tainted with association with far right-wing group. You had the League of Saint George, this was before my time, but erm, you had other more obscure right wing, extreme right wing groups. Erm, and erm err eventually I think national attention focused around the issue of the BNP’s headquarters in Welling, but I’m talking here of the eighties and nineties, erm you know, erm constant battles err with the far right about reclaiming erm, reclaiming particular the space where progress of groups erm, would be present and sell their literature and not allowed fascist groups to begin a platform to, to sell and or distribute their wild literature.

**Yeah. Erm, you mentioned previously the sort of intersection between direct anti-racist struggle and housing with that, the family in Canning Town.**

Mm.

**Erm, could you describe what the sort of, particular… erm, was it easy for Asian people to find housing or was there discrimination to certain levels?**

Well I mean, housing certainly in East and North London has always been erm, been a controversial issue, or how should I say: the lack of housing. Err, and when you put in the racial element then you know, it becomes an explosive issue. The Liberal Democrats- the Liberals at the time in Tower Hamlets, when the council were developing the so-called Sons & Daughters policy, by which they meant indigenous white err people of Tower Hamlets… So they had this policy where if you had a second home in Bangladesh, or a home in Bangladesh it was qualified as a second home, then you were therefore declared to be intentionally homeless. If you lost your home in Tower Hamlets, even XXX (31.21), and he said the word, it was a pun, of being on a barge on the river to house homeless Bangladeshi families [laughs] and erm, uhh housing then and still is, is a major issue, and of course we hear this propaganda, this myth erm, that migrant families are being prioritised by this Labour council, that didn’t care about white working class communities, and the BNP slogan was err, ‘rights for whites’, which for a time attracted a fair bit of support from very decent, ordinary people who were frustrated by what was going on around them, who’s sons and daughters were still living with them you know, at a relatively advanced age. And so we developed the message to counter the rights for whites message: rights for all. Err, and that I think was quite an effective message. Everyone asking for one section of the community to be disadvantaged at the expense of err, you know, of another. We want the rights you know, for everyone, but obviously recognised that racism, institutional racism in particular, prevented one section of society getting access to services.

**Did you, did you manage to sort of engage disaffected white people who were sort of, you know, at risk of slightly going towards this racist-**

-To a small extent, yes. I think I’d be lying if I said that erm, er- we never err, our campaigns were always you know, awkward looking, but we never had the resources- the capacity, or in the sense of, how can I put this, the political vision because we were, you know, responsive, actions were responsive, actions were always defensive, err so certainly looking back now err, I don’t apologise you know, for how we worked. But erm, err you could say that maybe that was the task of wider groups like trade unions. So to that extent I think yes, we did because by going round the trade union movements trade unions started employing erm race advisors, not that this answers necessarily, I’m saying: they started having black workers’ groups, they started taking equality issues seriously, they started taking against fascists, you know, stuff like that. Err, so I think, I like to think that our work was a catalyst in other organisations that had the capacity and the strength to, to tackle the sort of issues that you asked me.

**Yeah. Err, were there any other social needs that, sort of particularly impacted on the Asian community in terms of provision of stuff-**

I mean, I mean again I was not greatly involved err with err some of these maybe pressing issues, erm- there was immigration advice obviously, social care, elderly Asians, erm… I was involved with a group called erm Aram Hal, which is now East West Trust, which was a home, I think, gave room for about eight people, or a dozen, elderly- the traditional norm was that elderly Asians would stay with their families, but as err, for various reasons, that model started breaking down and so elderly Asians were feeling isolated and that support needed, special provisions, that was not forthcoming from the statutory sector, erm and the East West Trust runs erm, projects, so the one behind Upton Park station, Hamara Ghar, err there are dozens of, you know, elderly Asians living erm, so yeah, I mean the fight against racist attacks opened up a hole of erm, a whole range of err issues that needed to be tackled. And I think this is where erm, XXX (35:12) SubCo erm, was one of those groups that did emerge erm, around catering for the specific needs of err, of these communities. And I’m glad SubCo’s zone is still there.

**Mm.**

A valuable, you know, they’re doing some valuable work in East London. But it’s origins started off in the way that the statutory sector err totally neglected the needs of, of- from growing section of our community. Err, today I think the work of groups like SubCo complements what the statutory sector does, although with cuts and commissioning and so on, the role of groups like SubCo is going to become even more important, because councillors can’t you know, not just can’t, and don’t work in the same traditional service providing, service provision level that they used to do at one time.

**Yeah, erm when did you first come into contact with what would come on to be SubCo, or the people who were involved directly with setting it up?**

Well, err I don’t want to individualise this, but the group of activists in Newham who were fighting racist attacks, who were err, err trying to get the police to take this issue seriously, trying to counter fascist activity, trying to get the council and the Labour parties to wake up, erm we were a small group of people in that sense, not to be elitist, but this is how these things tend to be. And inevitably people err, we had you know, one particular woman who was one of the founders of Newham Monitoring Project, she was an immigration advice worker, and through her work set up a domestic violence advocacy service – and in the seventies this, you know, before domestic violence and other issues was taken…. erm, whereas because women were addressed by councils, some very pioneering work. So the XXX (37.05) service, the, the domestic violence advising service developed into the Newham Asian Women’s project. You had groups like Sub Co again, people like your director Taskin Riash, she was involved in the marches erm, err such as the Newham Seven and Newham Eight, so people like her went on, quite rightly, direct their energies into particular err, into the fight against a particular form against discriminatory racism. And so this is where I remember SubCo. I was not greatly involved to be honest, but I can talk, what I want to do is give, set in context how groups like SubCo came around.

**Mhm. You mentioned before you started recording that you were- you looked over the funding application of SubCo, or-**

From memory I was asked to be referee and I was very pleased to be referee, because I could vouch for the work that erm, err they did in early years err and I’ve kept in, not in close distance, but certainly aware of the progress of the organisation, and I think any group that has survived for what, twenty-five years, they must be doing something right.

**-Absolutely. Umm, obviously twenty-five years is a long history for an organisation, do you think the needs of the community have stayed the same, similar or have they-?**

Well the basic needs are always there, it’s about how different services, the change in service provision, erm you know, means of such communities, in some ways the means have become more complex? Arrival of erm, refugee and migrant communities, the changing nature of East London communities, I mean East London is a melting pot: communities you know come, settle, move further out, erm so the needs are there, they take different forms, different shapes – possibly more acute today. With err… let’s not forget, the austerity politics that has been imposed upon us, and the cuts err, and the fragmentation that we see in many parts of society, fact as you know, world globalisation, Brexit, you know, how is the local economy going to shape up? So those challenges I think will be more, more acute err, the basic needs are there but they might take sharper forms. So, yeah the work of SubCo I think is so essential.

**Do you think the relationship therefore between SubCo and local government has changed, err with the sort of new demands and new kind of ways that their work is funded?**

Well I think the different, err ways that local government responds, commissioning and so on, has got to be born in mind that at the end of the day erm- the basic nature of the relationship, has that changed? I mean you’ve got the local state, the local council elected by local people, err and erm, the basic nature of this relationship with the third sector- the voluntary sector, whatever you want to call it, erm that I would say is still the same, you know. One representing the needs of a community, and asking the councillors with its communing powers, with its wider duties, and various local government legislation, to be responding in the best way it can.

**Mm, erm, what’s- so you mentioned the other organisations that you were involved in-**

-Yep.

**-And the sort of wider anti-racist movement, have they retained their organisational strength or have they sort of been absorbed into-**

Well… I mean, I mean… I’m talking about all four decades now, how east London in particular has changed, so I can only talk… about my own experiences, but sadly many good groups erm, you know, have either frittered away or gone into decline, erm… and erm, this is why I pay tribute to SubCo for having survived all these years.

**Have you- presumably there must’ve been times where you visited SubCo and seen the work that they’ve done first hand at the centre?**

Well I’ve not been to SubCo as many times as I like to, but I keep in touch through friends – friends of mine are running the organisation, I’ve seen the publications and so I’m generally aware- but no, it would not be fact to say I got to- kept an ongoing close relationship. I know sufficiently enough of them to know the purpose of which the group was set up, is still you know, continuing that work.

**Excellent, well I’m not sure I have any more questions, do you-**

You can always ring me over the phone if you’ve got something, see what you can make of that-

**-Yeah.**

-Because you’re only going to use, what, a minute, thirty seconds?

**No, but all very fascinating to thank you so much.**

Read a book called Newham: The Forging of a Black Community.

**THE END**