

Harmesh Manghra and Sardul Dhesi



Harmesh and Sardul reminisce in Punjabi about their days in Birmingham Industrial Language Training Services, and reflect on their subsequent career development and the ILT legacy, from onsite language training to anti-racism and equal opportunities in service and educational provision. Part of the "Multilingual Memories: Birmingham 1984" project.

They speak colloquial Punjabi, which poses some challenges for automatic translation, so for non-speakers a rough translation into English is provided below.

... **Sardul** – And this scheme was regional as well as national.

Harmesh – Yes, I remember the national centre was in Southall. National Centre for I.L.T.

Sardul – I remember I remember.

Harmesh – Oh, Jaswinder Singh was there. One of us. He had a lot of trouble, it was hard to think about him. They treated him badly, but he won again. It started from there, according to me. The fight against racism started from there. In my opinion.

I would say that person was bilingual. His job was not teaching but he would be used for translation or some other things. He would say, what is the difference between your job and mine. And I want parity, it should be the same. He fought, and he won. You know.

Sardul – I remember, I remember. The service that was there in those days, I think Tom Jupp started it nationally. It would have been with Celia Roberts. At Southall there was

Pete Wilson, and in the West Midlands, the main player was Clarice here. And Alan Murray was in Walsall.

Harmesh – Alan Murray was in Walsall, right?

Sardul – They were the main ones. Remember.

And after that I think they started some work - what was the training centre called? On Holyhead Road.

Harmesh – Yes, it was the skill centre.

Sardul – Skill centre.

Harmesh – For the unemployed. On the one hand, we had a scheme for those who were working, the other scheme was for those who were unemployed. They had to be taught technical skills. Handsworth Skill Centre which is on Holyhead Road and on Middlemore Lane. It was a very big centre there.

I know I used to go there, then Gordon also came. And we used to go there, where people were taught technical skills. We didn't go to the workshop, but after that workshop, there was a guy named Kevin.

He used to give a shop talk. He didn't recap everything. And he used to give a talk. We used to make notes and lesson plans.

Sardul – To explain.

Harmesh – Making lessons with these notes. It was good fun.

Sardul – And after that, on the other hand, I think the Jaswinder you talked about, I think ILT focus also changed.

Harmesh – Yes, it did.

Sardul – We did some training on racism awareness, leaving aside languages, leaving aside cultural awareness, and then a little bit more on racism awareness, do you remember? And I think during those days, our focus shifted from industrial to service industries. I think National Health Service, Housing Department. Remember the statutory organizations, right?

Harmesh – Yes, yes. I think it started with the Racism Awareness Program Unit (RAPU). Yash Patel did the training. Oh brother, their perspective was different from all the people who would have white colleagues, and they would say, "Oh my God! We are racists."

We do this, we tell them and give them information. And our people say "Yes, that is absolutely right."

They suppressed us and this structural problem was there. That the structure that it has, it was a whole structural problem. That the people who come to implement it are mostly white. And they don't have any of their own people. That's why all that racism is going on.

Now look where we started from, we started from there.

Sardul – No, that's right, that's right. After that, well, what kind of succession was there from ILT? What happened after that in Birmingham?

In the West Midlands, I remember in those days around 1985, brother, remember? Steve Stevenson. He was an inspector. He got together with all the principals, along with John Blythe, Jeff Hall. For the Section 11 fund, for each college, for the staff.

Remember? In each college, you too would hear my thoughts, I would also hear the rest of the colleagues.

And what do you think of that program, was it successful?

Harmesh – I think it was very successful, because my role was in Garretts Green. And my focus was on those Black and Asian people, to bring them into education.

Because the participation rate was very low. And those poor people would do whatever jobs they could get in factories and shops. But very few of their people would come in for education.

And I think, I worked there for 2 years. But at that time, Colin Flint was the principal there, yes. And Tony Henry was the deputy principal, the assistant principal. They told me, whatever you do, go and bring people in.

I remember I opened a centre in Parkfield Centre in Saltley, then opened a centre in Bordesley Green, where the people were very Muslim. 250 people came.

They said, where did Harmesh get these from? I said, they want to learn. Teach them. Get them painting and decorating, get them carpentry and joinery. Or you teach them motor vehicle.

Oh, brother, 250 people came there. It was successful, then they said, one said, I want to offer prayers. I told them that they need a place to pray. They said okay, take a place, give me a room, 1 came, 2 came, 5 came, 30 came.

Sardul – The room was full.

Harmesh – They said, come, then our entire centre was full. Oh, I said, you have to provide facilities to the people, they pray on Fridays and they have to provide facilities. From there, the talk started that all the people said, that it is not enough to bring them and study, and they said that we also need proper facilities. That is the fight against racism structures.

Sardul – Okay, okay, I remember the succession planning of ILT for me.

Yes, I benefited a lot. In 1985, taking a one-year secondment, I did a Masters in Sociology, Race in Education from Birmingham University. I think it was very useful for my progression. Because after that, I got the equality post that was in Hall Green.

I also started working the way you started, I started opening centres, remember? Five Two Four Centre was on Stratford Road.

Okay and after that, the rest were all set. After that, there was a lot of progression. Head of Faculty, Assistant Principal, Vice Principal. I think if I had not worked in ILT, I would not have got the promotion. Maybe I would not have got the promotion. So it was very good.

Harmesh – Yes. Brother, I am very grateful to you because if I had not met Sardul Desi, then I would not have had any confidence and Clarice would not have got me where I was.

I would have worked in the post office or I would have been on buses because that would have been the only work for our people. Those who were educated only got work in the post office or work on buses.

And I have had my own career, a career of 40 years. More than 40, since I started from ILT. Someone valued my language, someone valued me. They said, I speak this language. I said, where did I get this, I know a little Bengali. By talking to them, to people.

Sardul – There were good opportunities.

Harmesh – There were good opportunities.

Sardul – I studied when I did my Masters programme. I wrote an essay about the demographics of our students and staff here at Birmingham Colleges. What about the students and staff?

That day, I remember that the total number of staff in all our 11 colleges was 33. Non-white.

Of those 33 I think it would have been 50% Asian, no no 70% Asian I think. But I also remember that in those days there was one black African Caribbean lady.

In those days. And now that I have left college I checked the numbers last year. At the moment there are 1200 staff working in our South and City College. 33% of them are black and Asian. 30% of the middle managers are black and Asian.

Harmesh – That's very good.

Sardul – We have made good progress, haven't we!

Harmesh – Very much, very much...