

Interview questions sent to me by Quartz and the responses I sent to them.

Firstly, can you tell me a little bit about your background, where you grew up, and your path to where you are today? How did you get into curating and what led to this position at the British museum?

My story is similar to that of many other members of the South Asian, especially Gujarati, diaspora living in the UK today. My grandparents were born in India, Burma and Tanzania, while my parents were both born and raised in Uganda and Kenya. After Idi Amin's expulsion of the Indian community from Uganda, most of my family, including my parents, arrived in the UK as refugees. It wasn't an easy time and the stories of hardship they experienced and managed to overcome make for difficult if inspiring listening. As for me, I was born in Leicester and the message of focusing on my education and working hard was drummed in from an early age, as was the idea that I needed transferable skills in case I ever needed to flee to another country and start again.

I saw a lot of my fellow Indians at school encouraged to pursue 'traditional' subjects and careers by their parents, but my parents held back from this approach. I loved school, did quite well academically and they didn't bat an eyelid when I decided to study history, art, classical civilisations and maths at A-Level and then ancient history at university. It was only years afterwards that I realised how radical this hands-off approach was. But, then, my parents didn't – and still don't! - quite fit the mould of the stereotypical British Indian parent of their generation. My mother - who sky dives and walks marathons into her 60s – has always taken me to cultural events, museums and exhibitions. When I say 'always' I really mean it: I was a baby when she took me to see the 'Vasna' exhibition at the Museum of Mankind in London. Incidentally, I now curate the collection originally displayed in this exhibition. This long exposure to such varied, and often museum-based, cultural experiences meant that I have long felt at home in these environments.

It took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, and while I was at university I tried lots of things including an internship at KPMG. It was only after a brief stint of work experience at Jewry Wall Museum, Leicester that I realised this is what I wanted to do: work with collections in a museum. I was studying at UCL and the British Museum is just down the road, so I contacted the Department of Coins Medals to see if they had any opportunities for a student volunteer to work on a project. Happily, they did and I learned so much from my time here. While studying for my PhD, I applied for and got a 1-year post in the Department of Asia at the BM. And the rest, as they say, is history... and a lot of hard work along the way.

What especially caught my eye in your Tweet announcing the new position is that you're among the first (if not the first) person of Indian heritage to take on a permanent curatorial role at the museum. Given the history that Britain and India share, why do you think it's taken so long for this to happen, and what does it mean to have an Indian-origin curator at the British museum?

Generally, working in the arts sector in general, or heritage and museums in particular, wasn't seen as an ideal career choice among many in the Indian diaspora here in the UK. Instead, lots of first and second-generation members of the diaspora were encouraged to pursue more traditional career paths into medicine, accountancy and so on. It's certainly something I saw among my peer-group at school and in the wider community. Looking back, I was the only Indian person studying ancient history at my university and I didn't know any other Indians who wanted to work at a museum either. I think this situation translated into an overall lack of representation in arts and heritage institutions. At which point, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: with so few Indians – or people of colour more generally - in the sector, it ceases to be seen as a viable career opportunity.

I'm happy to say that I think things are changing. More recently, I have seen many more members of the diaspora enter the sector in different capacities and institutions across the UK at a junior level and I think this bodes well for the future. I really hope that my appointment, and those of other Indian colleagues, encourages other members of the diaspora to enter the profession. Speaking more specifically about my own department at the museum, I am not the only BME member of staff to be appointed recently: in the last 4 years, two Chinese-origin members of permanent curatorial staff have also been hired. So, there seems to be a wider pattern of change and representation happening in the museum as well as across the sector as whole at the moment and I think it's vital that this momentum is maintained.

I think it's also important to note that I'm not the first Indian person to be appointed to a permanent curatorial post at a national museum in the UK: I have numerous Indian-origin colleagues at the British Library and the V&A, for example. But, with my appointment at the British Museum, it means that fewer curatorial glass ceilings remain to be broken.

In your new role, what is the story or history of India that you will be exploring? Can you tell me more about the materials and objects that you'll be looking at and what you're aiming to do as the first Indian-origin curator in this space?

I am 2 weeks into my role, so I'm still in the process of formulating my long-term research plans at the museum – an exciting prospect! I am responsible for the ancient to medieval objects from South Asia at the museum, as well as some of the anthropological objects from this region, and these collections cover India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The objects include small clay figurines from Mohenjo-Daro to pink sandstone sculpture from Mathura, bronze sculpture from the Deccan and textiles from across the subcontinent. Over the next month or so, I will start to refine a collection-based research project.

During the recent refurbishment of the Sir Joseph E. Hotung Gallery for China and South Asia which I was involved with, I surveyed much of this material and began to think about different research and display approaches. One thing I did in the gallery

was draw stronger links between historic objects and the Indian diaspora community in the UK. For example, in the section dealing with medieval Jain sculpture from western India, I included images of the Jain Centre in Leicester, which has contemporary architectural and devotional sculpture carved in Gujarat. My aim was to show our visitors the continuity of this sculptural production in this part of India and this religious tradition in the UK. I would like to develop this type of work to co-curate displays with diaspora communities using historic and contemporary objects.

One of the curatorial decisions we took during the gallery project was to have an open space along the centre of the South Asia section of the gallery so diverse cultural events can be held here, including music, dance, talks and discussions. I'm currently working on a funding proposal with my colleague Freddie Matthews, our Head of Adult Programming, to raise money for this because it would be such an enriching experience for our local and global visitors to be immersed in the incredible musical and dance traditions of the subcontinent.

India, like other post-colonial countries, has seen much of its history and heritage end up outside the country for a variety of reasons, not least its own disinterest in conservation. But of late there's been a move to try and get some antiquities back, and a lot of debate over museums keeping collections of the history of other countries. In this context, I wonder if you can tell me more about how the British museum built its collection of Indian objects and artifacts, and what your opinion is on a museum in the UK holding on to them?

I am keen to learn more about the history of the collection and to share this with our 6 million annual visitors, 70% of whom are from overseas and which include a quarter of a million school visits. It is one of the reasons I recently worked with my colleague Bryony Smith to set up free, public lunchtime collecting history gallery talks at the museum, which are given by curators and other researchers working on collection-based projects here. My talk is next March and I have a huge amount of research to do before then.

Given the colonial history between India and the UK, it won't come as a surprise to learn that some objects now at the British Museum, and other museums across the UK and Commonwealth more widely, originated in the subcontinent. I think it's important to research how, when and by whom objects were acquired, and this will be part of my research moving forward. I also think it is important to collaborate meaningfully with colleagues in India to share knowledge, skills and collections so that we can embark on this learning journey together towards a shared narrative. The recent co-curated India and the World exhibition held at the CSMVS, Mumbai and National Museum, New Delhi, to which the museum also loaned a considerable number of global objects, are good examples of this.

Alongside this work, I want to look at what the collections mean in the UK today, especially among the considerable and diverse South Asian diaspora communities here. This is one of the reasons I will be working with community groups on research

projects and displays. Once the funding comes through for the cultural programme we are planning, I am keen to invite diaspora artists, among others, to respond to the collections and displays through dance and music. This is, for me, one of the most important aspects of my future work and I very much hope it will encourage Indians in the UK to engage with their heritage in a meaningful way and, hopefully, enter the sector.

And finally, given your experience in curation and history, I was wondering what you think the way forward is for heritage conservation in India. How would you describe the state it is in today and what would you say needs to change?

During visits to India over the last few years, I have noticed a lot of positive changes in Indian museums and heritage sites. It's also great to see more and more Indians travelling across the country to see and experience the incredible collections and sites here. Both of these points go hand in hand: the more people travel to these places, the more discerning they become and the more they expect from their visit. For example, I visited Humayun's Tomb in Delhi after its recent restoration and not only does the site as a whole look magnificent, but the new signposting also makes a difference to the overall visitor experience. This project shows what is possible with a large-scale project and it would be fantastic to see it replicated in other sites, too, including through further collaborative work.

This picture of on-going improvement in terms of display, collection storage, education and outreach, and other aspects of museum and heritage work, at different institutions is also coming through from colleagues in India. I'm lucky to meet and work with colleagues from India and other countries around the world as part of the International Training Programme run by the British Museum. It's a great way for all of us – from the British Museum and other institutions abroad – to share skills, knowledge and experience with one another and an opportunity to build links so that we can work together on different projects in the future. It's also a good opportunity to get a better insight into the issues affecting the heritage and museum sector in India and see how we can collaborate to sustain improvement.

There is also lots of really exciting and innovative work being done across the heritage and arts sectors more generally in India and I follow a lot of this through social media. This includes digital work but also new approaches to more traditional tour guiding in cities with exceptional heritage. I'm so happy to see more young people choose to enter the sector. Overall, this is all driving positive change and improvement, so I am hopeful and excited for the future. But, this doesn't mean we should become complacent: anyone who regularly visits museums knows that there is still a lot that needs to be done.