

Transcription: BV022.29.4
Interview with Raj Chouhan
Audio Recordings: 2022_0029_0004_002.mp3
INTVWR: Kate Petrusa
Interviewee: RC: Honourable Raj Chouhan
Date of interview: December 22, 2022

- 1 INTVWR: Okay. Today is December 2nd, 2022 and I'm interviewing Honourable Raj Chouhan.
2 My name is Kate Petrusa, assistant curator at the Burnaby Village Museum. I just like to have
3 that recorded. So I've mentioned our exhibition. I wondered if you could just tell me briefly
4 about your early life in Punjab where you grew up and if your parents came from the same area.
5 Just basically where you're born and your early years. Yeah.
- 6 RC: Sure. I moved to Canada in '73, January 1973, and the first city I landed and lived was
7 Burnaby.
- 8 INTVWR: Oh, really?
- 9 RC: Yeah.
- 10 INTVWR: You came directly?
- 11 RC: I came directly to Burnaby.
- 12 INTVWR: Really? I didn't realize. I knew you came in 1973.
- 13 RC: No, we lived right here on Waverley Avenue near Imperial. That **00:01:00** was my first
14 destination. Yeah, no, I was born in Punjab. My town is Ludhiana, L-U-H-I-A-N-A. That's
15 where I grew up and went to school. So when I was there, I come from a farming family. So um,
16 when I was in college, I was quite active with the student union in talking about student rights
17 and promoting student education facilities etc, low fees, those kinds of things as we usually,
18 students do that here in Canada as well. That struggle continues. So I came here in 1973. The
19 idea was that I'll go to **00:02:00** law school, that's what I wanted to - both of my brothers are
20 lawyers, two of my nieces are lawyers. But when I came here, I, you know, was waiting to go to
21 school and I ended up going to farm, just to, out of curiosity and see how farming was done in
22 Canada. And it was a shocking experience, to say the least. I found out the people who were
23 transported to the farms in Clearbrook, Abbotsford area, they were transported in very unsafe
24 vehicles - no seats, no nothing. When you go to farm, there are absolutely no facilities at all. If
25 you are just working out there without any protections, pesticides or sprays, even people were
26 working around **00:03:00** them. No running water to wash their hands or drink water, none at all.
27 So I asked some questions and I got fired and got right back home. It happened a few times.
28 Then I talked with some of my like-minded people and found out that farm workers in British
29 Columbia were not even considered workers, they were not covered under Employment
30 Standards Act, Labour Code, Health and Safety, none of that applied to them. So it took some
31 time to figure out more how it was working, and then I found out the farm workers in California
32 had formed their union and they had made quite a few, um like, improvements to their working
33 conditions. So then **00:04:00** we reached out to the community here, how they do it, and all,
34 basically how the farming here was controlled by the labour contractors. Labour contractor is a
35 middle person who provides labour to the farmers. And then by doing so, he was uh, I don't

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36 know if there are quite a few yet, but in those days there were very many labour contractors who
37 were doing it. They were taking cut in the wages, there was no hourly minimum wage, and
38 people were working on a piece rate. Say, for example, if you are picking strawberries to fill that
39 box is called 'flat'. If you fill that up, and you will get \$2 a flat or something like that, which
40 depends what time of the season you are doing it. If **00:05:00** it's the middle of the season, yes,
41 you can do quite a bit more. But if it's at the shorter seasons at the beginning or the end, you will
42 be working longer hours and working less and less. That's how it happened. Um and those labour
43 contractors also were from the same community. Most of the people who work in the farm were
44 South Asians, elderly people. So when we try to talk to some people, they were very intimidated,
45 very afraid. They were not willing to speak with us because they were under the threat that if
46 they make any complaints, they would be deported. So that, because there were no laws, that
47 they didn't know anything about their rights, so it went on for a while. In the meantime, I got in
48 touch with the **00:06:00** legendary leader of the farmworkers in California, Cesar Chavez.

49 INTVWR: Oh

50 RC: Yah, he was a world-famous leader, supported by President Kennedy and the Pope at that
51 time. Caesar and I became really good friends, so like you know, he was, mentored me to do all
52 that. After several years of preliminary work, we finally formed the union called Canadian
53 Farmworkers Union in 1980 in April. So we were instrumental in bringing some changes, but
54 again, it was some basic changes.

55 INTVWR: Yeah.

56 RC: The government at the time, the Socreds, were not willing to move because they were
57 controlled by many of their MLAs they were from the farming community themselves, farmers.
58 So they **00:07:00** were not too keen.

59 INTVWR: Wow. Interesting. Amazing. So I wonder if we could go back. I was really struck by,
60 that you said that you actually landed in Burnaby first, and we want to have a section in the
61 exhibition that actually talks about the experience of migration. So I'm just wondering if you can
62 tell me a little bit about basically even to the detail of when you were packing your luggage to
63 come to Canada. We want to have some sort of, just to show people what that experience was
64 like. If you remember, did you have one bag that you had to put certain things in? Did you have,
65 kind of your experience to prepare to come?

66 RC: No, I had one suitcase. When um, from our village our town, went to New Delhi. That's
67 where the international airport was and still is to fly out. It **00:08:00** was in those days, things
68 were different. And now, you go through all kinds of security checks, all kind of clearances, and
69 all that. In those days, there was nothing.

70 INTVWR: Yeah, 1973.

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71 RC: Yeah, 1973. Even though I had formal visa, many people traveled to Canada without any
72 visa because visa was not required. So um, it was an experience itself. I never even seen a plane
73 other than air force plane, which is, you know there's an air force terminal close to our village
74 and you could see those jets going back and forth, that sort of thing, but never a commercial
75 airline. So gotten there, "Wow, okay." Now, you're sitting and nobody bothered to ask us to put
76 seat belts on or anything and people in the plane were smoking.

77 INTVWR: Yeah, yeah (laughing)

78 RC: You **00:09:00** know, so um, and it was quite a flight for me when we were at altitude, I
79 think about 30,000 feet or whatever it was. Anyway, so I looked outside the window - I had a
80 window seat and it means, "Wow. It feels like I'm flying in a blue ball inside the ball." Because
81 you could see the ocean in the bottom and this blue sky up there. That was some experience. I
82 came to Vancouver when we landed,

83 INTVWR: It was direct from Delhi to Vancouver, yeah.

84 RC: There was uh, no, I stopped over in Tokyo.

85 INTVWR: Okay, [inaudible] it was just like a stop over... Okay.

86 RC: Yeah, we were just in transit. When we landed there and I saw snow (laughing). And my
87 friends, my wife's family, **00:10:00** like, we knew each other, so uh, we were driving back to
88 Burnaby. My first impression of Burnaby was like, Wow, it looks like Kashmir. You know.

89 INTVWR: Really?

90 RC: Yeah. Like, the north, north of India, Jammu and Kashmir. It's just like beautiful part of
91 India – like snow, lakes, everything, mountains. Yeah, that was the first impression.

92 INTVWR: Great. So and you mentioned your wife. So I was curious why Burnaby was your
93 place to land to set up your new life.

94 RC: My friend lived here, so I came to where he was. And also, I met my wife's family in India
95 before I came here. We **00:11:00** were quite young when we met with each other, so we decided
96 to follow each other. She came first, I followed her.

97 INTVWR: Really?

98 RC: Yeah.

99 INTVWR: She came to Burnaby first?

100 RC: Yeah.

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- 101 INTVWR: Wow. And so, did she have the same friend? How did she come to Burnaby first?
- 102 RC: Her father came to Canada in 1957.
- 103 INTVWR: Wow, okay.
- 104 RC: Yeah. And most of their life, they lived here in Burnaby.
- 105 INTVWR: Really? On Waverley Street or Avenue also?
- 106 RC: No, different addresses. But then my wife, her mom, and three brothers, they arrived here in
107 1970.
- 108 INTVWR: Really? Wow, okay. So her dad came first, 1957, and then, I guess 13 years later, the
109 rest of the family came to Burnaby.
- 110 RC: Yeah, that's right.
- 111 INTVWR: Wow. Okay. Would you tell me the name, if you can, the parents?
- 112 RC: Yeah, yeah. So my **00:12:00** father-in-law, his name was H-A-R-D-I-A-L Singh, last name
113 Grewal G-R-E-W-A-L. And he was quite active in the community as well. He became the
114 president of Sikh Temple in New Westminster.
- 115 INTVWR: Wow. I did not know that either. That's an important connection, actually. Yeah.
116 Wow.
- 117 RC: So um, when they first arrived, they rented a place close to the temple because he worked in
118 the mill. He worked in a mill in Vancouver. But shortly thereafter, they moved back to Burnaby.
119 They bought a house on Waverley.
- 120 INTVWR: I don't suppose you remember the name of the mill?
- 121 RC: No.
- 122 INTVWR: Okay. Vancouver, though. Wow, that's really interesting. Your **00:13:00** wife, well
123 the wife-to-be, she was living here?
- 124 RC: Yeah.
- 125 INTVWR: For 3 years, and then remarried here also?
- 126 RC: Yeah, we married here at the Sikh temple in New West.

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127 INTVWR: Wow, okay.

128 RC: Yeah, so that's how it was. And at that time, although kids are much more smarter than we
129 used to be, I didn't plan like that. Well, the kids do it, my daughters know. Like, Oh, we have to
130 think about this. We have to do that. We do this. Oh, God. Why didn't I think like that?
131 We uh, my wife's brothers and myself, in the evening, we would go out and play on the railway
132 track by Metrotown which was not Metro, it was Sears. Yeah and like Sears was the big store
133 there. So we were all, in the evening, were having all kinds of fun around that area. **00:14:00** But
134 Burnaby was the home, that's where we were. We lived here for several years and then moved to
135 New West.

136 INTVWR: And that just made sense for buying a home, or renting, or was it work-related you're
137 moving?

138 RC: Yeah, yeah, it's no, it's uh, wherever we could find cheaper rent. You know, our one
139 bedroom apartment was \$140 a month and we were struggling. So how can we pay for it in those
140 days? \$140.

141 INTVWR: That's hard to believe, really. You both were living in Burnaby in 1973? Yes? Okay.
142 And so, were you married before you came? Just to get the timeline straight?

143 RC: No.

144 INTVWR: Okay, so you came in 1973. Okay, right, right. Yeah, okay. **00:15:00** Then so you
145 were you were commuting to Abbotsford to work on the farm at that point?

146 RC: I did several times while I worked there for a while. Then I said, "That's not going to help
147 me to sustain my life". You know, it's like, it was hardly paying anything. So uh, then I found a
148 job in a saw mill, you know, a plywood mill, so that we could have a decent living. But the idea
149 to go to school, I gave up. You know, um because myself and my friends, like my people, we
150 thought we have to do something about farm workers. So that's what, the driving force, so we
151 worked on that. And also in those days, there was lots of racism **16:00:00**. You know um, racism
152 is still there in our community - here, in everywhere else, but it's a different kind of racism. In
153 those days, it was in your face kind of racism. People who are beaten, people who are killed,
154 their houses were burned, their windows were smashed. That kind of racism. So when we formed
155 the Farmworkers Union in 1980, at the same time, we also formed a very broad-based
156 organization called 'BC organization to fight racism' which was um, which had indigenous
157 communities of faith groups, United Church, labour unions, Sikh, you know um, you name it.
158 Everybody was part of that, you know, all ethnic communities and lots of non-ethnic community
159 people as well. Yeah.

160 INTVWR: And was that in Vancouver?

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161 RC: Here.

162 INTVWR: Here. **00:17:00** Here in Burnaby, again. Oh, wow. Really?

163 RC: Yeah.

164 INTVWR: So it was like, it was grassroots? Like you kind if just, who - people you knew that
165 lived here?

166 RC: Yeah.

167 INTVWR: Did you gather in one spot?

168 RC: Yeah. It's uh, the person where we usually met was at his house. Professor Doctor Hari
169 Sharma.

170 INTVWR: Oh, right. Of course. Okay, I see. Right. Yes. I didn't think of the name. You gave the
171 name of the organization and I wasn't thinking. Okay. Yes.

172 RC: So, Doctor Sharma, you know like, he was this central point for us to get together at his
173 house in Burnaby.

174 INTVWR: Right, right. got you.

175 RC: He was teaching at SFU. So we will meet there and talk about all kinds of different things,
176 workers' rights, social issues, that kind of thing.

177 INTVWR: Yeah. That's a very intense Burnaby connection, like a base. That reminds me of
178 something else, that the Canadian Farmworkers Union, we were really were curious to **00:18:00**
179 know if there was a specific reason that it was centered in Burnaby - like, the offices were. Is it
180 just because you guys were here? Kind of ? Yeah, so you were here so you made it close to
181 home.

182 RC: Exactly.

183 INTVWR: Yeah. And was that also grassroots or did you had an office?

184 RC: We had an office on Sixth Street near 16th and 13th Avenue. Again, you know like, we
185 were looking for a place where we would be a small amount because we didn't have any money.
186 The union was not a traditional union, like dues collecting - you sign up a membership card, you
187 would pay your dues taken out deducted from your payroll or paycheck on a biweekly basis,
188 nothing like that. We were basically getting help from the labour movement or some donations.
189 **00:19:00** The religious groups who are helping us, that kind of thing.

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190 INTVWR: Yeah, okay, right. That makes sense. That's good. Okay. I've touched on the luggage.
191 You don't happen to remember what you brought in your luggage? I'm going back for a minute.
192 Do you have any memory of even 1 or 2 items that you might have?

193 RC: Yeah. I had a suit, I had a sport jacket which I think I still have it somewhere, but maybe
194 we've given it away. You know, it's like um, it's not kind of, you know like, teenagers wear those
195 kind of clothes. I won't be now.

196 INTVWR: Yeah, but that

197 RC: I could find out.

198 INTVWR: Yeah, that would be really cool to know because - this might sound silly, but that
199 would be a really great 00:20:00 piece to have in the exhibition. (laughing)

200 RC: I know,

201 INTVWR: If you...

202 RC: I'll see if my wife [inaudible], you know like, she never throws out anything.

203 INTVWR: All right. Well, yeah. If she knows.

204 RC: I'll check it.

205 INTVWR: It would be really interesting to know that.

206 RC: It was a long time ago, yeah. Even though when we were doing organizing farm workers at
207 one farm in Langley, we were on strike. I was beaten up, you know, I had my shirt and pants
208 were soaked with blood and everything. So now, I think, "I should have kept all those things."

209 INTVWR: Yeah, I know. I mean, it's, it would be very impactful to see.

210 RC: But like people - do you know that jacket I'm wearing on the far-end picture on the top?

211 INTVWR: Mmhmm (in agreement)

212 RC: That, you know was in many, many of the pictures at those times.

213 INTVWR: Yeah

214 RC: Even in the rally, so many people asked me 00:21:00 to have that jacket. I couldn't find it.

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215 INTVWR: That's sad. It's too bad. It's a cool jacket. Yeah, I mean especially, but I think it's
216 helpful for people who come to an exhibition to see the photo, say, and then the real
217 thing...it's...

218 RC: Yeah, totally.

219 INTVWR: Anyway so –

220 RC: Yeah, I know. We, we have um lots of pictures on history and we have donated lots of
221 material to SFU library.

222 INTVWR: Yes

223 RC: They have it. And the person who was supposedly writing in my book should have done 5-
224 years ago. He's still working on it. So if you need some pictures, you can contact him. His name
225 is Craig Berggold.

226 INTVWR: Okay. That's great.

227 RC: Yeah, he's a professor at Queen's University. Yeah so, he had a huge collection of pictures.

228 INTVWR: That's great. That's excellent. I'm sure we'll [21:59 lose a fruit]. 00:22:00 Let's see.
229 Where are we? Did your parents also come to Canada?

230 RC: No.

231 INTVWR: They never did. Never? Okay, so they stayed in your village.

232 RC: My mom died when I was quite young, my father never came here, my younger brother
233 came here once for a few months and he took off [inaudible 22:18] "I don't want to stay here."
234 So he went back.

235 INTVWR: He just didn't like it? Yeah.

236 RC: Yeah.

237 INTVWR: And when you came, I guess I didn't really ask, but was your motivation to come to
238 Canada specific or were you exploring? Do... was it...

239 RC: Yeah, you know um, there was no actual, I don't remember any planning went into that. I
240 really wanted to go to Canada just because my friend was here and my then wife-to-be was here.
241 I just followed them, so then 00:23:00 took it as it came.

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242 INTVWR: Yeah. No, it makes sense. Yes. Let's see... The farmworkers - okay, we've covered
243 that. Just making, looking at my notes. Oh, yeah. And so, yeah, right, so we did talk a little
244 about, so you landed on Waverley Avenue, you stayed here until the rent was a little cheaper in
245 New West. And did you, it would be interested just to know your other connections to Burnaby
246 in terms of, did you move back to Burnaby at a certain point? Do you live here now? Just to sort
247 of trace.

248 RC: I live in Burnaby now. Yeah, no we lived all over in New West, Surrey, Victoria and then
249 back to Surrey. Then since 2001, living here in Burnaby.

250 INTVWR: Okay. And did you, again, it might not have a specific reason, but do you **00:24:00**
251 was there a reason that you moved back to Burnaby, say specifically?

252 RC: It's very central.

253 INTVWR: Central, yeah.

254 RC: When I left Canadian Farmworker Union in 1986, I got a job at the hospital employees
255 union.

256 INTVWR: Right, okay.

257 RC: So,

258 INTVWR: Right...

259 RC: I was the head of collective bargaining organizing department, which is a very large union.
260 Its headquarters are here in South Burnaby.

261 INTVWR: Yeah. Was that always the case?

262 RC: No. They had office when I started in Vancouver

263 INTVWR: Okay

264 RC: In a few years after the battle, and here then built the union office here. That was quite
265 handy for me.

266 INTVWR: Yeah, it was perfect, really.

267 RC: Yeah

268 INTVWR: I'm sure I could find this, but do you remember when that move happened? Again, it
269 was probably rent-choice, I would think, like.

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270 RC: Oh, no. I know the dates. Yeah, yeah that's no problem. **00:25:00**

271 INTVWR: Okay

272 RC: I started with HEU in 1988. After working in Vancouver office for a year,

273 INTVWR: Okay

274 RC: I moved to Victoria then I became the head of HEU Island Region.

275 INTVWR: Okay

276 RC: So I was there for about three and a half years, then we moved back to Burnaby. At that
277 time, the new building was built in Burnaby.

278 INTVWR: So it was built in the early '90s? The new building?

279 RC: Yeah

280 INTVWR: Yeah, okay. '92 or so.

281 RC: Yeah, I would say '93.

282 INTVWR: Okay, '93.

283 RC: Yeah

284 INTVWR: Okay, great. And you were there, I think, did I remember this correctly for 18 years?
285 Okay, yeah. That's right. So I guess, yeah really since in 1993, you weren't living in Burnaby but
286 you were close by.

287 RC: Yeah, that's right.

288 INTVWR: Okay, great. I'm just looking through my **00:26:00** notes. Looks good. I mean, we've
289 covered - I did do some homework before I came. Just so, I have some of the basics. And yeah, I
290 know a lot about, just other interviews you've done related to the experience of working with
291 such grassroots in this community organizing around things. I think in other interviews, you've
292 mentioned your experience of racism, like, very in-your-face, sort of awful experiences. So that's
293 sort of here, I'm just checking. And I guess, I mean, this isn't always an interesting question, but
294 just given everything you've done and all the people you've worked with, is there some aspect of
295 the South Asian community, sort of in the Lower Mainland widely, that you're most proud of?
296 You're most sort of proud, and if it's **00:27:00** connected to Burnaby in some way, that's nice,
297 but.

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298 RC: Well, South Asian community has a very interesting history in Canada. Even in like 1898
299 when people started coming to Canada. Then we went through the history of Komagata Maru,
300 losing right to vote in 1907, and all that. Many of those people who work in the past lived here in
301 Lower Mainland in Burnaby, New West, Vancouver area because there were two main temples
302 which were the central focus point for people to get together. It was the Khalsa Diwan Society,
303 which is the Ross Street Temple now. They used to be on Fraser and the Temple in New
304 Westminster. **00:28:00**

305 INTVWR: Yeah

306 RC: The people who lived in Burnaby, New West, or Vancouver, they would go there, get
307 together as a cultural centre. So that was amazing history the South Asians have gone through,
308 yeah. Most of the people in those days who came they work in the lumber industry, then
309 gradually they got into farming. They started buying farms then expanded into that, and then
310 over time once they got the right to vote back in 1947, then many of the restrictions were lifted.
311 So they were able to get into professions like accountants, professors, medical doctors, lawyers,
312 and all that which they were prohibited to join before. So it's **00:29:00** a very colorful interesting
313 history of South Asian community in Canada, especially in British Columbia.

314 INTVWR: Yeah. So just that ability to stick with it even though it was hard.

315 RC: Yeah. In those days, even when I came in '73, the community was very small. Most people
316 knew each other. If something happens, somebody passed away - they will or most people go
317 and to the funeral because the wedding people will go there and get together. Now as community
318 so large and diverse, it's not homogeneous, kind of you know, as it used to be as diverse as any
319 community could be now.

320 INTVWR: Yeah, that's something we've really noticed. Even just in Burnaby, like you have the
321 Hindu temple, you have the Isamali centre, and there's a mosque just across the street from the
322 museum.

323 RC: From city hall from [inaudible - Europe]. **00:30:00**

324 INTVWR: Yeah. I mean, truly.

325 RC: Yeah, no, it's very diverse. But especially, the second generation –

326 INTVWR: Yeah

327 RC: They're Canadian as anybody else could be. And their interest, the first generation,
328 regardless of which community people come from different parts of the world, their connection
329 with their home country is always very strong, not so much for the second generation. My, I have

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330 two daughters and yeah they know quite a bit about India, but their interest to go live in India is
331 not there.

332 INTVWR: Yeah

333 RC: They think like a Canadian and work like Canadians and that's what they do.

334 INTVWR: Mmhmm, that's what they are, yeah, yeah. (laughing) Very interesting. Okay, I
335 **00:31:00** I mean I guess I just have two really last questions. Which is, you've kind of touched
336 on these, like you know the experience of your children or younger self, like second generation is
337 different from your experience in Canada. I mean, totally different. I think you've sort of
338 touched on that, unless there's anything else you want to add.

339 RC: No, it's um, my older daughter, she is she followed more or less the same work I used to do
340 with the unions. So she works with BC Government Employees Union (BCGEU).

341 INTVWR: Oh

342 RC: Yeah, she's one of their senior staff rep.

343 INTVWR: Wow.

344 RC: My younger one is totally different, she's an animator.

345 INTVWR: Interesting. So an artist?

346 RC: She's an artist. She has published three books already. She's you know like those, what they
347 called, comic novels or whatever.

348 INTVWR: Yeah, graphic novels.

349 RC: Graphic novels.

350 INTVWR: Really? **00:32:00**

351 RC: Somebody wrote a story and then you know she'll do the whole story in her artwork and
352 everything. Well, she did one for Disney.

353 INTVWR: Wow. What's her name?

354 RC: Anu's name is Anu A-N-U, but her trade name is Anumation.

355 INTVWR: That'd be fun to look her up.

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356 RC: Yeah you can look at. She has more followers than I have. She just recently got an award
357 from one of the very prestigious community newspaper magazine in Disney for her work.

358 INTVWR: Wow, that's very exciting. Well, yeah that's, so yeah that gives a sense of the
359 difference. I mean, even just what you've described – you're coming here, your experience of
360 farms, I mean, their work that your daughters are doing now is, of course, different from your
361 **00:33:00** early days. Yeah and I mean, okay, so let's see. I mean you kind of touched on this, but
362 we all, we are also interested in experiences of like racism. I don't know, you mentioned that
363 where you were assaulted or you were hur, hurt at uh

364 RC: Picket line.

365 INTVWR: A picket line, oh, okay.

366 RC: That was more like work-related.

367 INTVWR: Okay, yeah, okay. Just tempered, yeah. But is there any experience of racism,
368 whether it's overt or covert that you experience in Burnaby or related to any work or otherwise?

369 RC: It's always, like, the funniest thing is when somebody's meet with you, like they said,
370 "Where are you from?"

371 INTVWR: I see

372 RC: Like that kind of thing.

373 INTVWR: Yeah

374 RC: And you try to, "I'm from Burnaby" "Oh, no, no. Before that." Then I intentionally say, "Oh,
375 from Victoria." "No, you know **00:34:00** what I mean?" I say, "Yeah, we also lived in Surrey."
376 (laughing)

377 INTVWR: For you (laughing in agreement)

378 RC: So that's how people, like some people can get over that. Just recently that story from
379 England from Buckingham Palace, one 83-year old person was interacting with one of the
380 employees. She is black, but she is born and raised in England. And the 83-year old, she's the
381 godmother of Prince William's and she said, "So, where are you from?" And she said, "I'm from
382 England. I was born raised." "Oh, no, no. I mean, you mean you know, where you are from?"
383 Like that kind of thing, you know. And it's quite an interesting story and she had to apologize
384 and **[inaudible 34:54]** she's gone.

385 INTVWR: Wow.

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386 RC: People are much more aware about racism now what they used to be **00:35:00**, those kind of
387 things. It's um, yeah,

388 INTVWR: Yeah, it's...

389 RC: Still there. In um, at um, employment, people still face lots of discrimination. We had to
390 fight with Vancouver Sun and some newspapers who tried to describe that if a crime was
391 committed by ethnic person, they would say the Sikh, you know man, blah, blah, blah. But if it's
392 a crime committed by a white person, they will never say it's a white person. They just put the
393 name in there. It took us so many meetings with editorial boards and all that to convince them
394 that that's not how you do it.

395 INTVWR: Wow

396 RC: Yeah

397 INTVWR: That's really interesting. So yeah, that was sort of, a side, I mean, it's connected to
398 what you were doing but a very specific

399 RC: Exactly

400 INTVWR: And practical **00:36:00**.

401 RC: Yeah. And also to sensitize police force, we had several meetings with you know Vancouver
402 Police, RCMP, everywhere because it, it was so obvious - some people are targeted just because
403 of their color of their skin or race.

404 INTVWR: Wow, and was this with Canadian Farmworkers Union?

405 RC: BC [inaudible 36:27] Farm.

406 INTVWR: Okay, got you. Yeah, I guess you would have just lots of stories advocacy and stories,
407 experiences of racism through that. Yeah, interesting.

408 RC: Yeah,

409 INTVWR: Wow.

410 RC: But you know, Burnaby is one of the most beautiful cities we have in Canada and one of the
411 most diverse cities in Canada. In one of my school here on Edmonds Community School, 58
412 **00:37:00** different languages are spoken in one elementary school.

413 INTVWR: Amazing, yeah.

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414 RC: Over 120 languages spoken in Burnaby.

415 INTVWR: Wow.

416 RC: Edmonds Street is, so you want to go to any different restaurant? Just walk over there –

417 INTVWR: Yeah

418 RC: From different countries.

419 INTVWR: Yeah, yeah it's amazing, yeah.

420 RC: And we have a lot more festivals during in the summertime every week from Ethiopians, or
421 Koreans, from Chinese, India, and all, all sorts of things.

422 INTVWR: Mmhmm, yeah. That's a big change from 1973, I would think too.

423 RC: Oh, yeah. Huge.

424 INTVWR: Yeah

425 RC: You know we never had anything like that before, but uh luckily we have had a progressive
426 government in Burnaby, Municipal Government over the years which implemented, introduced
427 and implemented lots of changes like that **00:38:00**.

428 INTVWR: Mmhmm, yeah, yeah.

429 RC: Yeah, I know. It's amazing and it's very central. Very close to airport, close to freeway,
430 close to ferry.

431 INTVWR: Yep, yeah, it's a center, yeah. No I know, I think it could be why a lot of people
432 come.

433 RC: Sorry..

434 INTVWR: What's that? Was that a knock?

435 RC: I don't know.

436 INTVWR: Okay, sounded like one. Well I only have one question left.

437 RC: No, it's not a knock.

438 INTVWR: Okay,

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439 RC: I think it's the

440 INTVWR: The air, yeah... Well, it's kind of two questions. So maybe I'll start with, again, you
441 may have already answered this but just another chance to ask it in a different way which is - if
442 there's any part of the history of your experience or the South Asian Canadian experience in
443 Burnaby that you think is important for the museum to know, to share with audiences?
444 Something unique, about Burnaby?

445 RC: Well, you know history **00:39:00** is written every day. History is not something that we only
446 read about ancient history of some country. We make history every day and that history needs to
447 be recorded and um, learn from what we were 20 years ago or 200 years ago. And people from
448 different communities, different backgrounds who lived in Burnaby for a long time, they have
449 contributed so much, and South Asians are, just like another community. And they have
450 participated here in all aspects of our social life - cultural, religious, economy. And they've been
451 there, they're everywhere.

452 INTVWR: Yeah, yeah.

453 RC: And I'm so proud of our our community, our forefathers who had that vision to **00:40:00**
454 fight for our rights, you know. So, I'm, I was inspired by all those people who struggled so much
455 to win basic rights, like right to vote, you know. And like the Komagata Maru in that part of
456 history, if you read those people who were there, we call them 'Gadri Babas' G-A-D-R-I the last
457 one Babas, like revolutionary old people. That's what it stands for and the literal translation. And
458 their history was um, they were their main motivation at that time was to make sure that India
459 was a free country because India was controlled by

460 INTVWR: Yes.

461 RS: British in those days. So they wanted freedom. While they were doing it, fighting for
462 **00:41:00** the freedom of India, they were also fighting for the basic rights here because they
463 were treated like second-class citizens in the worst form, but they never gave up. So when I read
464 that history and I said, "Wow. They made their contribution for the future generation, and we
465 were the future generation." When I came here, I said, "We have to continue the same work for
466 next generation."

467 INTVWR: Mmhmm, yeah

468 RC: So that's what kept me going.

469 INTVWR: Hmm, was that thinking of your responsibility for the next generation. Yeah, that was
470 a question I had, just what would have kept you inspired for such a long time because it was
471 tiring and difficult, I'm sure, just throughout.

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472 RC: Well you know, when I was younger, I never thought about that I was tired.

473 INTVWR: True.

474 RC: Something came up, like people who lived on the farms and they were treated **00:42:00**
475 badly, somebody will call around 10:00. In those days, there were no cellphones, somebody had
476 to go to a public payphone and call us. And we will just, 2 or 3 of us, jump in our car and go
477 there, help them - even we knew that when we go to those private farms and all that, it wasn't
478 safe, we were threatened, even some, one time, somebody pulled a gun at us, vicious dogs were
479 let go after us, like it just , yeah, but it needed to be done.

480 INTVWR: Yeah. And I forget if you mentioned this, were your parents involved with this kind
481 of, like in their own way? You mentioned that.

482 RC: Yeah. My father was the head of our village council for

483 INTVWR: Yeah, right

484 RC: Many, many many years.

485 INTVWR: Right.

486 RC: During the partition of India in 1947, **00:43:00** he took upon himself to make sure that
487 people who lived in our village, that he gave them safe passage to go back to Pakistan - the
488 Muslims who lived there,

489 INTVWR: Wow.

490 RC: And you know putting his life on line. And he almost got killed twice, but he never gave up,
491 so. He, he would make sure that when we were young, never even occurred to me why he was
492 doing it. He would take us to the part of village where poor people lived and he will just force us
493 to sit with them like you know, talk to them, play with them, eat the same food from them. Now,
494 I realize why he was doing it. He instilled those values in us. So I carried those over continuing
495 with that.

496 INTVWR: Yeah, I see. Well, that's some intense training or um, awareness building,

497 RC: Yeah.

498 INTVWR: I guess, as a child **00:44:00**. Yeah, wow, yeah.

499 RC: So he was there for 27 years, a head of Village council.

500 INTVWR: Village council. And may I ask when where you born? Just to get a sense.

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501 RC: Yeah, 1949.

502 INTVWR: Okay. All right, yeah. Partition. Thank you, amazing. Again, also you don't have to
503 answer this last question if it's if you've already covered it, but one thing that you wish younger
504 generations of South Asian or anyone in Burnaby? It doesn't really matter, but maybe
505 particularly South Asian Canadians is there something you hope they understand about who they
506 are, or identity, or what it means to live in Burnaby or Canada?

507 RC: Yeah. No, I always, when I go to lots of schools, **00:45:00** talk to kids in elementary school
508 and also in high schools, not to forget their past. You know, if we remember our past, we are
509 much more knowledgeable than we know what we need for the future. If you don't know the
510 past, we are, we don't know what the future is going to be like. To make better future, you have
511 to learn from the past and improve. So I hope the younger generation, South Asians or anybody,
512 they are not only consumed with their own personal needs, think about the community. I really
513 hope they will volunteer their time to do some community work, and learn from each other, and
514 keep their eyes open. I'm not superior than you are, I'm not **00:46:00** more knowledgeable than
515 you are - I'm always open to learn from other person, I taught for 18 years on how to negotiate
516 collective agreements and all that sort of thing.

517 INTVWR: Right.

518 RC: And every time I go to classes, "I'm here to learn from you" - that shocked, "What? You're
519 here to teach us." I said, "Of course, I'm here **[inaudible 46:22]** adults." You know, but I said,
520 "Yeah. I'm here to teach you. But again, I'll be learning from your experience, your life
521 experience, everything else." So if you, you know have that open mind, younger people, they
522 would have a much brighter future.

523 INTVWR: I agree, ha ha ha.

524 RC: You know because sometimes, we just draw a circle around ourselves and we think that's
525 the universe. We have to step out of that circle.

526 INTVWR: Yeah, yeah for sure. Yeah.

527 RC: And life is **00:47:00** not always negative.

528 INTVWR: Yeah.

529 RC: There are challenges, so we enjoy our challenges, we work, and learn from that. And then,
530 um, I also hope people are not very judgmental, it's um, just accept as they are.

531 INTVWR: Great, thank you. Thank you for sharing your story and your wisdom.

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532 RC: Yeah. You know, I can, in Victoria, as the speaker of the Legislative Assembly, the question
533 period is very intense.

534 INTVWR: Right, of course.

535 RC: You know, so the opposition will ask question and they are worked up. Wo, wo, like scream
536 and yell and the government always say, "Take it easy. It's not end of the world. You can ask
537 questions, make your point, **00:48:00** and let the other side answer" And also the other side, "Let
538 them ask questions, it's okay." You can agree to disagree, don't fight over. And after question
539 period, after 30 minutes, they still have to work with each other.

540 INTVWR: Mmhmm, yeah, exactly, exactly.

541 RC: You know like, we are lucky living in Canada. If you compare us with other countries
542 around the world, the politics in those countries, I don't want to live there. We are very civil
543 society as compared to majority of places that I can count. But yes, we need to improve
544 ourselves, we need to be good. But again, if we just always complain and complain and
545 complain, then we forget to look at the positive side of our life.

546 INTVWR: Mmhmm, yeah for sure. No, it's easy. Unfortunately, it's easy **00:49:00** to do that.
547 Yeah.

548 RC: It's so easy and some people like it.

549 INTVWR: Yeah, that's true. Fantastic. Well, thank you very much for your time.

550 RC: No problem.

551 INTVWR: And if you, um...

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