

# **Ranjit Sondhi interviewed by Samenua Sesher** **Respect Due, Museum of Colour**

**00.01**

## **Introduction Music**

'Intro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

**00:08**

## **Samenua Sesher**

You're listening to Respect Due.

**00.16**

## **Introduction music**

'Elision' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

**00.22**

## **Samenua Sesher**

For this project we've invited UK creatives, journalists and heritage organisations to nominate an individual who's had a big impact on their creative journeys. The individuals nominated for Respect Due are people who have inspired and innovated in their field, people who have demanded change and paved the way for generations to come. Their achievements will be showcased in the Museum of Colour along with portraits by the artists Grace Lee, Erin Tse and Naki Narh. The Museum of Colour is a digital museum celebrating 250 years of creative achievement by people of colour. In this audio series, you will hear from the nominees themselves.

**01:09**

### **Ranjit Sondhi**

I was born in 1950 in the Punjab, in India, just a few years after that country had become independent and shaken off the imperialist yoke. So, it was quite a momentous occasion and I missed it just by a few years. (laughs)

**01:27**

### **Samenua Sesher**

Ranjit Sondhi is a tireless cultural leader and a passionate champion for the arts. His determined enthusiasm has taken him from a commune in Handsworth to the hallowed halls of some of the UK's most powerful institutions. At every stage of that journey, he has continued to fight for the economically and politically disenfranchised.

**01:49**

## **Ranjit Sondhi**

My father was a senior civil servant, so therefore I went to a missionary school and was taught by Irish Christian Brothers. I could recite Shelley at will, I knew the length of the limestone tunnel that ran from under Buxton to the Peak District without ever having been in England. But I didn't know about the Indian freedom movements that were taking place over the last hundred years. And I, therefore, knew more about the mother country than I knew about my own.

When I arrived in England in 1965, at the tender age of fifteen, it was like coming home. This is what I had been prepared for; I would come here and I would just slip into English society quite naturally. I suppose in subsequent years I found that that wasn't the case, that I would not be accepted for various reasons. But I was fortunate enough to come to live with my surrogate family, an English family, who were very liberal. And of course, they introduced me to a different kind of Britain - a Britain that was not just simply made up of people in positions of power, but also people who lived at every level of English life.

Indeed, it was through them that I started to work, between school and university, at Handsworth adventure playground, which was a new concept. And this was particularly so because it was located in a very deprived area of the city. We lived in Sutton Coldfield, which is outside the city, and travelled in every day so I could work in this rather poverty-stricken area. And that revealed for me, for the first time, that there was such a thing as an English working class. It's not something

that you think of when you're sitting in the Punjab, being taught by the Irish Christian Brothers. But it is actually a revelation when you realise that there are very poor people in the hearts of the British cities.

And I think that really got me thinking, so that when I went to university I joined various societies that looked at 'The New Britain'. One of them was called the International Society, which in fact my surrogate parents - my English parents, as it were - had themselves joined, because they were both also graduates from the University of Birmingham. And I suppose while I was at the university there were several things going on in the rest of the country that were transforming the public mood. There was the rise of Powellism; there was a huge groundswell of support for him, but also a groundswell of anti-Powellist feelings. And I was very much part of that. Right across the city from the University of Birmingham was the school to which Powell had gone when he was a young boy, and had invited him to come and speak. So of course, the university students turned out in full to try and prevent him from doing so. And it was there when I realised that the police were there in order to protect, as it were, the establishment, trying to keep us out of the school.

It was a rough time, where there were a few clashes with the police, and I think it was a formative experience of my life. So that, of course, when I left the university with a first class degree in theoretical physics, I set aside a career in the sciences to join an urban commune, which was set up by other university graduates from the university - all with very good degrees - to engage in what we called 'neighbourhood politics'. We had felt that there had been a real failure, in the country, of institutional political systems of parliamentary democracy. And

therefore, we needed to engage in a different kind of neighbourhood politics, in which people could feel a sense of the power that they had to change the course of their own lives, and to determine their destiny.

So, we set up various... a number of projects in Handsworth: an action centre where people could come in and get advice and support, particularly with the benefit system; we set up the Law Centre, advisory centres of all kinds for women and young people; and education centres as well. A different approach to the usual sort of establishment interventions into poor areas.

**06:39**

### **Samenua Seshar**

So, you studied nuclear physics, and then you decided to pursue a completely different career. How did your family feel about that?

**06:50**

### **Ranjit Sondhi**

(laughs) Don't forget that I was being groomed to follow in my father's footsteps. He became a commissioner of the Punjab in charge of 60 million people, and I rejected that. I think my experiences in Britain had formed my thinking, when I discovered that there were gross and intolerable areas of poverty within the working classes of this country, and that there was a great divide between the rich and the poor. And the notion of a class society had come into my mind and I could see that that class society existed in India as well, and that the Indian Administrative Service was simply following in the footsteps of their

English predecessors. And I didn't particularly want to go back in that position.

And my father was absolutely appalled when he heard about my urban commune. He sent my mother and she - to give her her due - slept on a mattress on the floor in this commune for six months, trying to understand what I was doing. This is the wife of a commissioner of the Punjab, you know, who has a retinue of police and other orderlies, you know, and there I was, sitting here in one of the poorest areas of the country, working part-time together with my other colleagues to raise enough money to keep body and soul together, while spending all our time working in the community.

And living in the community, by the way - the centre, the commune, was actually in Handsworth - unlike other professionals who would travel into the cities, big cities, from their nice little suburbia, do their day's work with the poor people, and then move back out again; a rather patronising approach to a class society. But you know, years later, when I started doing other things which my father could recognise as having status, then I think his attitude changed; and towards the end of his life, he was quite prepared to admit that we had done something substantial in the commune.

**09:01**

### **Samenua Seshar**

In 1976, Ranjit founded the Asian Resource Centre in Handsworth to help those communities that the commune struggled to reach. There

are now Asian Resource Centres across the UK. But at that time, it was one of a kind.

**09:17**

### **Ranjit Sondhi**

It was not possible, in that era, to bring in people from different backgrounds into the centre, as we wanted to do. So, with the best of intentions, we were still not able to reach out to all the people who really did, I think, require assistance at the time. And so, it was felt that I should go and set up a different centre, and indeed it was called the Asian Resource Centre, which might attract all the people who we were not able to assist. Within the first week, without any advertising, we had about 400 people a week coming into the centre, speaking different languages, which we could cater for.

I worked there for ten years; again, setting up different facilities with the help of friends and colleagues who also felt the same. And we produced a range of projects: immigration advice centres; children's clubs; a women's group; and particularly a hostel, or I should say a shelter, for women in trouble - young women who were escaping the tyranny of their families, or wives who were the victims of domestic violence. We did that in a very discreet way, so as not to disturb the cultural boundaries of our communities, but to provide assistance to individuals where it was absolutely necessary.

**10:45**

### **Samenua Seshar**

Ranjit left the Asian Resource Centre in 1985, and was soon scouted by the Independent Broadcasting Authority.

**10:53**

### **Ranjit Sondhi**

At that time, there was no public selection method - it was a tap on the shoulder. And I think somebody in government had recognised that there was this young man in the middle of Birmingham who was doing something unusual, and that perhaps you might want to recruit him into the system. There was also, of course, a growing realisation within government that they had to diversify at the top end, and they needed people from different points of view, different cultures, to come in and sit in that regulatory role.

I did that for two or three years, and then, of course, the digital revolution was taking place and we were moving from the old style of broadcasting into the digital space, which meant that the spectrum could accommodate a lot more services - both television and radio services. And I was moved on to the radio authority, where we spent the next five or six years licensing all kinds of radio stations. And my particular interest was to get to the ethnic and community radio stations and give them a voice for the first time. We had people on air, expressing their views, enjoying their music, speaking their languages, to audiences that were prepared to listen to them. So that was that.

And then, parallel to this, I got pulled into the Commission for Racial Equality and landed up as the vice chair to Herman Ouseley, who was the first black chair of the Commission for Racial Equality. This was



perhaps the first commission in the race relations industry that had some teeth. Well, according to some of my critical colleagues, it had none! But my point was that these commissions were actually independent of government and could hold governments to account, as indeed we did. We frequently fell out with the Home Secretary at the time, and we had a chairman who was ferociously independent, and so I think was the rest of the Commission.

I moved on then into training judges, through the Ethnic Minorities Advisory Committee of the Judicial Studies Board... judges, magistrates, probation officers, senior police officers, and so on. Under the guise of human awareness training, we delivered what we thought was probably more around diversity training. And then I moved on into regulating legal education through the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Legal Education and Conduct.

Around about the same time, I was also a chairman of the Refugee Education Training and Employment Forum, which was an attempt to try and get government departments to be more sensitive to the incoming refugees and asylum seekers, at that time from Vietnam. And to get them settled in and become useful citizens as quickly as possible, despite all the reaction from the wider public against asylum seekers and refugees that you see even today.

And then came the big thing: after leaving the radio authority and having got well-versed in media regulation, I applied to become a governor of the BBC and was chosen in 1998. And the chairman of the BBC at the time, Christopher Bland, said, 'Welcome, Ranjit, you know that you will be governor of the BBC with special responsibility for the

English regions.’ Here I was, somebody of Indian background, who was nicknamed ‘the English governor’, which was a delicious irony, I thought! (laughter) But when I spoke to the chairman about it, he said, ‘You know, it’s best that you should be the English governor because we can’t choose any one particular Englishman to be a governor who could represent all different parts of England.’ So, I could get that strange logic.

Well, of course, don’t forget that when my father found that I’d become a governor of the BBC, and I had collected a CBE along the way, he was over the moon, because he understood the word ‘governor’ and he understood the words ‘Commander of the British Empire’. (laughter) I think, at that point, he rather radically changed his opinion about what I had done in the past.

**15.40**

**Samenua Seshar**

So, his son made good? Essentially, you made good.

**Ranjit Sondhi**

His son made good. Yeah. Even though I felt that becoming ‘good’, in that respect, was a bit dubious, he did not - he thought that was just wonderful.

**15:51**

**Samenua Seshar**

After serving two terms as governor, Ranjit left the BBC and moved into the NHS, serving as the chairman of the Birmingham Primary Care Trust. And of course, he still lives in the area he works.

**16:06**

### **Ranjit Sondhi**

Anyway, here I am, towards the end of my life, now engaged in probably the most difficult journey that I've ever undertaken, and not the journey from India to England, or the journey from a rich area to a poor area, but the journey that is the most challenging of all, and that is from the visual world to the non-visual world. And that is a real challenge, because I was registered blind about ten years ago. And since then I've had to cope with redefining my whole identity.

Identity, of course, depends on one's senses, and if you take away the senses, you have to then revise your entire view of the world - if you can use the word 'view' - and you have to start thinking about yourself in a very different way. And it's actually a real test of one's (laughs) character, as to how you cope with it. I mean, it really has been a difficult journey. And to some extent, sitting on the board of trustees of the Guide Dogs for the Blind has taught me so much about how one copes with the loss of vision, and how one needs to regain the desire to be independent and to live as fully as before.

**17:33**

### **Samenua Seshar**

Alongside his advocacy for the visually impaired, Ranjit has a passion for the arts and is chair of the South Asian arts organisation Sampad, which is based at the Midlands Art Centre. Sampad offers music and dance classes and leads the way in creating intercultural dialogue through its performances.

**17:53**

### **Ranjit Sondhi**

Art has a very important role in the world of disability - not just simply vision loss but all kinds of disability, mental and physical conditions, where art can make a supreme difference. In fact, art can come to the rescue in some conditions. Certainly, for me, sound has become very important, but also things like audio description. I go out to the Royal Shakespeare Company to look at Othello while having some headphones which are giving me a running commentary on what's going on between dialogues. It's enjoying a play in a very different way, through word pictures as opposed to visual ones.

And art needs to be sensitive to that. How can it maximise its impact for people who may be missing one or another sense? We all know how much art... what art means to people with dementia, and how storytelling - music, dance, movement - can be used in hospital environments, in care homes, in the home itself, where people are bound by illness. And I think that, you know, exploring the world of disability and the arts is a major challenge for us. And I think we are actually determined now, at Sampad and in other places, to really make a fist of that and to produce something remarkable, and we have done it. We've done it with women who are suffering from mental

health issues. We've done it with elderly people suffering from dementia, we have looked at movement classes for people with learning disabilities, and you can carry on like this, you know, this is a great list. And let's hope it continues.

I'm probably the only blind portrait painter in the country, I suspect. I started off in India doing portrait painting - not painting, sorry, sketching. I just use graphite and pencil, lead graphite pencil, and then I just use my thumb and forefingers, and I rub them around and get the impact, effect, that I need. While I was in India, I also got into Indian classical music and I learned how to play the tablas in India, and I've subsequently, years later, picked it up again in Birmingham. But yes, Indian classical music has always intrigued me, because I find the construction of Indian music absolutely, absolutely fascinating. And that's part of the reason why I got attracted to Sampad, which is, as you know, an arts and heritage organisation that is built around South Asian music and dance traditions.

But it's gone much beyond those traditions, of course; it now sees those traditions within the context of a much wider and more diverse cultural field. Bringing together different traditions can be tremendously life-enhancing, because I think there's a tremendous amount of innovation that takes place at the boundary. So, when you bring together, for instance, bhangra with flamenco, or you bring together bharatanatyam with ballet, or you bring together Indian classical sitar music with English classical violin, for instance, Ravi Shankar and Yehudi Menuhin. You know, really much earlier on in my life, I was privileged to go to a concert and the two people on the stage were Ravi Shankar, young Ravi Shankar, and a young Yehudi Menuhin,

playing the same music with each other on stage, just learning from each other as they went along. It was electric! It was the first example, I thought, of intercultural productions that I had seen. But if you deliberately create a space where you can have a cultural exchange, sometimes dangerous conversations... in those intercultural spaces, that's where you produce your energy and your creativity.

**22:20**

### **Link music**

'Elision' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

### **Samenua Sesher**

So, you've done so many amazing things. What do you think is the thread that runs through them all?

**22:25**

### **Ranjit Sondhi**

The thread... Personally, I suppose, (laughs) it's a yearning to be loved and respected, it's an insatiable desire for knowledge, it's a real compassion and pity for the poor and poverty-stricken, and it's a burning desire to have a just and fair society for all. Those are the kind of threads, I suppose... the guiding principles that have shaped my life in some respects. But together, I think they have led me to where I am from where I was.

**23:08**

### **Credit Music**

'Outro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

**23:18**

### **Samenua Seshar**

Ranjit was nominated by Sampad. You can find out more about the organisation by visiting [www.sampad.org.uk](http://www.sampad.org.uk)

Respect Due is presented by me, Samenua Seshar, and is produced by Stella Sabin for the Museum of Colour. You can find out more at <https://museumofcolour.org.uk/>. The music you have heard in this series is from Soweto Kinch's prize-winning album *Conversations with the Unseen*. Further episodes of this series are available across all podcast platforms. Respect Due is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Thank you for listening.