

## AGE EXCHANGE DRAMATISING MEMORIES OF ETHNIC ELDERS

Age Exchange is a community arts project translating the memories of older people in the London area into shows, books and exhibitions. Since 1983, the project has worked on 25 different reminiscence themes, all with a current relevance as well as an historical interest. The older people are involved as sources, as advisers, as writers and sometimes as performers, though the touring theatre productions are by professional actors.

The brief of Age Exchange is to record and celebrate the life experience of older Londoners, and we have chosen to work with many different groups within the community as well as with white British born pensioners. Recent projects have involved reminiscence and oral history work with Caribbean, Indian, Cypriot, Irish and Jewish older people. We have recorded their memories in mother tongue interviews, both individually and in groups, using their experiences as the basis for exhibitions, shows and books. These "products" give a far wider audience for the life stories and current concerns of these groups, utilising the mother tongue and English to communicate with audiences of different races, language groups and generations.

Our most recent project, "ROUTES", looked at the experience of Punjabi elders who came to Britain for work in the 1950s - 70s and have grown old over here. We were invited by an Indian social worker who had attended our reminiscence training courses to work with a group of older men and women who meet in a Sikh temple in south east London. This group had been established in 1988 in response to a felt need by the older people for a safe place to meet in the day time. They had not been made welcome at the pop-in meeting places organised by the host population, and most felt uncomfortable in environments where they could not speak their own language. Many of them felt too exposed to abuse of one kind or another to sit in the parks alone or to walk about unescorted. Some elders living in extended families were under pressure to get out of their homes during the day, so that they were using less fuel and creating some breathing space for the younger generations.

When we met the group for the first time in February 1991, they were meeting twice weekly in the local temple, cooking for themselves, receiving welfare rights advice and translation services from the local race equality project and social services, as well as some sporadic English lessons. We were asked to work with them creatively on a project around their memories, so that their stories as first generation immigrants would not be lost. We began by asking them to help us put together an Indian Reminiscence Box, which could reflect their own memories and could be unpacked by other older Indian groups and by children in multicultural classrooms.

Working through interpreters, we asked them about early memories of villages where they had grown up and of significant objects

which they thought should be in the box. It emerged that most of the things they played with as children had been home-made, so they worked on producing little balsa wood ploughs and carts, skipping ropes, dolls and kites. Many memories were associated with marriage rituals, so the group put in many decorative objects, dyes and powders connected with wedding ceremonies. The older people went on a day long shopping trip with Age Exchange workers to Southall at the other end of London which has a huge Asian population to buy objects for the box which would be modern equivalents of things they had used in the past.

While the box was being put together over a series of practical sessions, we recorded the memories of the older people and took notes of their stories through translators. We then hired Indian actors to play back some of these memories to them in an interactive workshop, inviting comment and elaboration from the group. Over a series of encounters between the actors and the older people, a short play was prepared looking at their decision to come to Britain and their first experiences in this country. The resulting piece was presented to over 100 people, mostly Indian Punjabis, on the day we formally launched the Reminiscence Box.

Age Exchange decided to develop this piece into a full production incorporating the early memories we had heard while making the box, and bringing the stories up to date with the older people's experience of rearing their families in Britain and growing old far from their childhood homes. Additional actors and musicians were taken on, all speaking Punjabi and English, and we worked intensively to create a piece of theatre which would carry the older Punjabis' experiences to a far wider audience. The play toured London and Europe for three months, playing to children and older people, building understanding and making connections between sections of the London population which had none before.

In the course of making this play, many preconceptions about the lives of older Asians in Britain were shattered. Our cosy perception of extended families taking total care of their elders in perfect harmony was the first to tumble. It is true that many older Asian people do live with their families, contributing a great deal towards childcare and cooking in the homes of their sons and daughters-in-law. However, many told us that they did not always feel easy in their homes because there was great pressure on living space and less possibility for extending to the open air, which made British homes less well adapted to shared living. There was economic pressure in many homes which made the use of fuel by elders during the daytime a source of conflict. The determination on the part of elders to vacate the house during the day was often tempered by fear of harassment and abuse, of which we heard several stories. There was often a language barrier between the elders and their children and grandchildren which was becoming harder to bridge with time. There were increasing conflicts between grandparents and the middle generation over attitudes to bringing up children in

Britain. As grandchildren are growing up speaking and writing English, they are a part of the culture of their peer group, and increasingly resistant to the cultural requirements of their grandparents, and the parents are often caught in the middle of disputes over continued observance of religious customs. "The third generation that are now coming up, we will not be able to influence them. We will be old. They can live as they please. But at the moment, our children still have a sense of responsibility to their parents."

In many cases, the relationships with the middle generation are strained as sons and daughters have turned their backs on arranged marriages, or have left them when they have not proved tolerable. One old man said to us: "Most of our kids had to get by in this community, they had to learn the English language and the English customs. Meanwhile, we were working in the factories and offices. What happened was that slowly our kids left our Indian customs and picked up English fashions, customs, ways of life and adopted them."

One of the problems experienced by older Punjabi people appears to be that their view of preserving their culture in a foreign land is based on a remembered way of life of many years ago. Some of our informants did recognise this syndrome in themselves: "It could be that the places we have left have changed a great deal now, but our old people's ideas have not changed much at all. We still hope that our sons and daughters will not do anything without first taking our advice. But those days have gone now. If we decide to arrange a marriage for our children, it is necessary that we consult them. We cannot stop them doing things that are bad for them."

Like any expatriate group, the Punjabi elders are concerned to hold on to a culture they recall rather than one which is evolving. For this reason, many older people who manage to go back to India for a holiday are quite shocked by the changes they see, and it is only those lucky few who manage to make regular trips who can keep touch with the developments in both Indian and British cultures. For some people this mobility raises different problems, such as an increasing desire to live back in India because of the climate, the language and the familiarity, but the potential loss of contact with their children and grandchildren and an anxiety over health care and finances precludes this alternative.

A sizable number of the older people we spoke to lived on their own or with spouses, and this arrangement seemed better designed to produce harmonious relationships with the younger generations. However, when one partner became ill or needed more intensive care, or one partner died, it was the younger generation who had to assume responsibility. In a few cases we heard of, the older people had been turned over to the local authority for housing, but this continues to be comparatively rare, and creates considerable language and dietary problems for the older people

concerned as well as for their carers. One woman was so anxious that we should not know that her family had turned their backs on her, that she invented a favourable "press release" for us about how she saw her five children most days. In fact, her social worker knows that she is acutely lonely and only sees one of these children and that on extremely rare occasions. The sense of disappointment on behalf of some older people is acute. One old man said to us, "If you plant a seed or a tree for shade, you hope that one day when it is grown you will sit under its shade. If when that plant bears fruit and gives shade it is of no benefit to the person who planted it, then it is very sad for that person."

When asked to review their original decisions to come to Britain, the elders explained that they often felt they had little choice at the time. Financial hardship (often debt) and lack of opportunities had made the men leap at the work vouchers offered by Britain in the post-war years. "Those of us who came here first, worked very hard for many years to stand on our own two feet. When we arrived in this country, all the Asians had 3 pounds each, and if we thought this would last a week then we were wrong. It didn't even last two days. But those who were already here before us were very supportive and gave food and shelter to those who were newly arriving." Most of the early arrivals, many of whom had served in the army, believed that their stint in Britain would be a mere four or five years, sufficient to resolve current difficulties and then return to India. The men came alone initially, since vouchers did not extend to families, planning to return to their wives and children as soon as possible. They lived very cheaply, usually sharing accommodation with other Indian men, and often sharing beds with workers on different shifts. Most went into building and engineering work and heavy industry, often accepting work below their previous standard of achievement. They saved everything possible to send home to their families in India. "All us old people who came here first, we all worked our bones off."

As they stayed longer, aspirations changed. "When we first came, we did so with the intention of going back. As we made progress and got wealthier, opening up shops and factories, we decided to make it permanent, to settle here." More men sent for their families, wanting to give their children the benefit of a British education, and fearful of slipping back into financial hardship in India. One man told us: "I think that we came here because we wanted to do something about the fact that we had very little money. First we settled in and then we brought our kids over. We didn't want to live separately. We wanted to live with our families. That's why we sent for our children. We wanted to be able to give our future generations more than we had had, a better standard of living, a better education. We wanted to teach them how to live with good values and principles; that's why we came here."

5

For the women we questioned, the concept of life choices seemed totally alien. They explained that they had acted on the impulses of their fathers and their husbands, and were often now governed by the whims of their sons. Asked what they would change if they could do it all over again, some older women said they would be more strict with their own children and not let them mix so much with the host community. They regretted the loss of language and the dilution of culture, and seemed to feel they could have stemmed this by acting more firmly to preserve it.

The younger Indian and Pakistani performers working with Age Exchange on the show, and the young relatives of the Punjabi elders we met while interviewing for the project, shed useful second generation light on these discussions. Some had agreed to arranged marriages with catastrophic results, others had gone for love marriages, but ended up looking after dependent relatives whose presence had put intolerable strain on these relationships, and others had totally ceased to have contact with older parents who refused to accept their westernised attitudes to marriage, work, family and child-rearing. Most of the younger generation Indian people we worked with did want to preserve aspects of their language and culture, and even their religion, but on their own terms, and not on those laid down by an older generation whose attitudes they often found fossilised and inflexible.

Lest this brief look at the research findings should appear wholly negative, I should like to point out some of the strengths we perceived in the groups we met, and their own strongly expressed desire that our play should portray their position positively. In several parts of London where there is a sizable Asian population the older people are getting together to organise their own activities, often with the help of social and community services at a local level. With the development of awareness in schools as to the importance of emphasising the positive aspects of cultural diversity, teachers are encouraging children to look at and value their diverse personal and family histories. Many ethnic elders we spoke to were keen to participate in classroom activities as storytellers, and are now taking the Asian Reminiscence Box into classrooms in their area, following performances of the Age Exchange show. One woman said: "I think that our kids should adopt the new customs alongside, not at the expense of our own culture." Another said: "Whatever country you are from, you should not forget your own upbringing. Your old culture and old memories are not just about making old toys and telling stories, but we have to explain with this the meaning to children. Only then can they learn. Otherwise it is just empty pictures and toys that don't explain what our culture was about. If we show them Indian toys, we should explain how our young lives were, how we lived."

The increasing interest on the part of second and third generation Indian people in London about their cultural heritage has led to a great many music and dance events in local community centres, and these events attract a large number of elders. The

6

greater availability of Indian and Pakistani films, videos and foods has made older people feel more at home and part of the community. One of the elders speaking at the launch of the Reminiscence Box said: "I am very glad that Amerjit (the Indian Social Worker) and her friends (Age Exchange) have made such good progress with this project. I hope it continues to grow and blossoms. When we talk about memories there are many things we mean. There's no point in looking back and having regrets. Looking back we can remember that we came here and are going to stay here. We have our difficulties and problems, but our memories help us to teach our children why we came here, the hardships we endured, and the things we will leave for them as we move on."

Another man said: "I don't know why our people have been so scared of the English. We run away from them. I don't know what fear we have of them in our hearts. Amongst my relationships I have English friends too because we have made this country our country. We are not about to leave it and go. That is why we must integrate." Whether others in the group agreed with this or not, the process of creating the Reminiscence Box and the show "ROUTES" with Age exchange certainly initiated a great deal of debate and discussion well beyond the sharing of stories about the past. Wherever the show has been performed it has set up lively debate in the audiences and has raised consciousness about many of the issues touched on above. Theatre is an admirable way of focusing discussion, since the plight of the representative characters, what they did and what they should have done, is an excellent and highly accessible way of involving the maximum numbers in discussion, especially where the actors stay in role to explain why they took the decisions they did at the time and what they might do if the situation arose again. The project has also enabled thousands of people in Britain and Europe who knew nothing of the lives of Asian elders to understand a little of their background and the otherwise somewhat closed world they inhabit in Britain today.

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