



Late Bhikhabhai Khushalbai Patel

09.04.1927 - 27.10.2019

“When you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”

(Matthew 6:3)



The above quote, from the Bible, is quite fitting for this tribute to Bhikhabhai (Dada) as not only is it a quote he said himself but also reflects on how Dada helped many people during his lifetime in a very modest manner, never reminding someone what he did for them or expecting anything in return. When thanked or commended for the help he gave, his standard response would be, “Mein hu kairu? Uppar varo badu kare” (What did I do? Everything is done by God).

My name is Dharmesh Patel and I am writing this tribute about my Dada’s life with the help of and on behalf of Dada’s entire family and those whose life he touched in his lifetime.

Born as the eldest son on 9th April 1927 to Khushalbai and Punjaliben Patel (Soyani), Dada spent his childhood surrounded by a large extended family in the gaam whilst attending primary and secondary schools in Gangadhara, Surat. After marrying Ba (Lakshmiben Patel, Afwa) in 1943 and 3 children later, Dada embarked on his courageous journey to the



UK on 17th December 1952 in search of a better life for his family, who temporarily remained in India, arriving at Tilbury Dock on 1st January 1953.

Gaining employment as a bus conductor for the West Bromwich Corporation, it is in this job that he faced the biggest challenge in the UK but also, unwittingly, became part of history. On Thursday, 17th February 1955, Dada appeared on the front page of the Birmingham Gazette with the main headline, "WE REFUSE TO SACK INDIAN"! Excerpts from the article read, "Despite the threat of strike action by 500 corporation bus workers if he is retained, Bhikha Patel, the 27-year old Indian trainee conductor is to keep his job.....Walsall and Wolverhampton have joined Birmingham in refusing to allow their buses over the West Bromwich boundary....The West Bromwich Crew says they will strike every Saturday until Mr. Patel is dismissed". Dada was one of the 1st persons of ethnic minority to gain employment in the transport industry in West Bromwich which the other workers took issue to and decided to strike against.



*West Bromwich Bus Strike,
1955, British Pathé*



*Birmingham Gazette article,
17th February 1955*



In fact, it became quite dangerous for him where, at one point, the workers came to Dada's residence with guns in hand and Dada hiding under his bed to save himself. Dada's saving grace was his manager and close alliance, Fred Clamp. So supportive was this tall Englishman to his short Indian friend that he would drive Dada to his place of residence with one hand on the steering wheel and one hand holding a gun, to protect Dada. With this remarkable support from his manager and others at the West Bromwich Corporation, as well as Dada's own sheer determination, Dada retained his employment and paved the way for other men of ethnic minority backgrounds to gain employment without prejudice. This close alliance between Dada and Fred, despite the language barrier, is one to be remembered. Fred escorted Dada to collect Ba and their three young children (my Dad, Foi and Kaka) when they arrived in the UK and also invited them to his wedding.



Dada and his manager, Fred Clamp, from the West Bromwich Corporation



On Tuesday, 2nd October 1956, Dada and his family were invited to and attended a “Gandhi Jayanti & Reception” at the Queen’s Hotel, Birmingham, hosted by the High Commissioner of India, Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (Sister of the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru) in support of the struggles and successes Dada had faced.



Invitation to the reception for the High Commissioner of India



Dada and his children at the reception for the High Commissioner of India



Dada at the reception for the High Commissioner of India

Eventually, Dada, Ba and their now 5 children relocated to London. It is there, they lived on Sheldon Road in Cricklewood where, from the stories I have been told, can only be positively described as a “halfway house”. I call it this because Dada invited people arriving from India to stay whilst helping them gain employment, a place to live and arranging all their legal documentation before they then left to start their own life within the UK.

We, as a family, don't know half of who Dada helped but one story that stands out is his help with a community outside of our own Samaj. The Harijan community started arriving in the UK in the 1960s who, although I dislike the term, were known as the “untouchables”. I cannot speak for the whole community of the Harijans but the ones that Dada encountered told him a very sordid tale and quite different to his own. The people he encountered from this community were purchased and treated as servants by another community with their passports confiscated, paid very little and lost all freedom. After hearing this sad tale, Dada engaged solicitors, wrote lots of letters and successfully enabled them to get their passports back, get alternate employment and housing, their own NHS number and bring their families to the UK from India.



Dada also took a very keen interest in education. For him, being strongly educated was the key to be successful in the UK. Aside from getting his own children educated, he helped many other families to pursue a successful education, assisting in getting their children into well known schools. Dada was quite different for those times. As my Nana, Dada's youngest son recently said, "He was a great advocate for education for girls as well as boys – an enlightened attitude for a first-generation immigrant in the 50s and 60s". It didn't stop there though, Dada also educated our Ba in politics! I grew up and lived with Ba and Dada and I was always fascinated by their political discussions about Thatcher, the Kennedy's, the UK royal family and politics in India. Obviously, Dada always let Ba win in their political debates!

After life in London, Dada and Ba moved to Yorkshire (Bradford/Leeds) in the mid-70's to pursue self employment in the shop business. Moving to Yorkshire provided the unique support of a community where I, personally, think doesn't exist elsewhere. Living with my parents, we grew up in a hard-working, supportive household where education was emphasised and the support of a community was key. Dada's contribution to the well being of our society still continued and life moved on to our future generations.



Dada's 90th Birthday celebration with his grand and great-grandchildren



Dada had a long and healthy life where his love of food (spicier the better!), celebrating Christmas and helping others, passed from him and Ba to his descendants. I am happy that we got to celebrate his 90th birthday in style where the whole family was present. It is through Dada that we know the importance of family and community and, more importantly, caring for our family in times of need.

Dada sadly passed away on Sunday, 27th October 2019 shortly before midnight on the day of Diwali, as the fireworks were lighting up the sky in preparation for the Indian New Year. Dada was surrounded by his family and friends leading up to and in during his final moments. I can only hope that we, as his future generations, can do half what he did in his lifetime.



Dada and our Leeds family



Dada and Ba with their 5 children