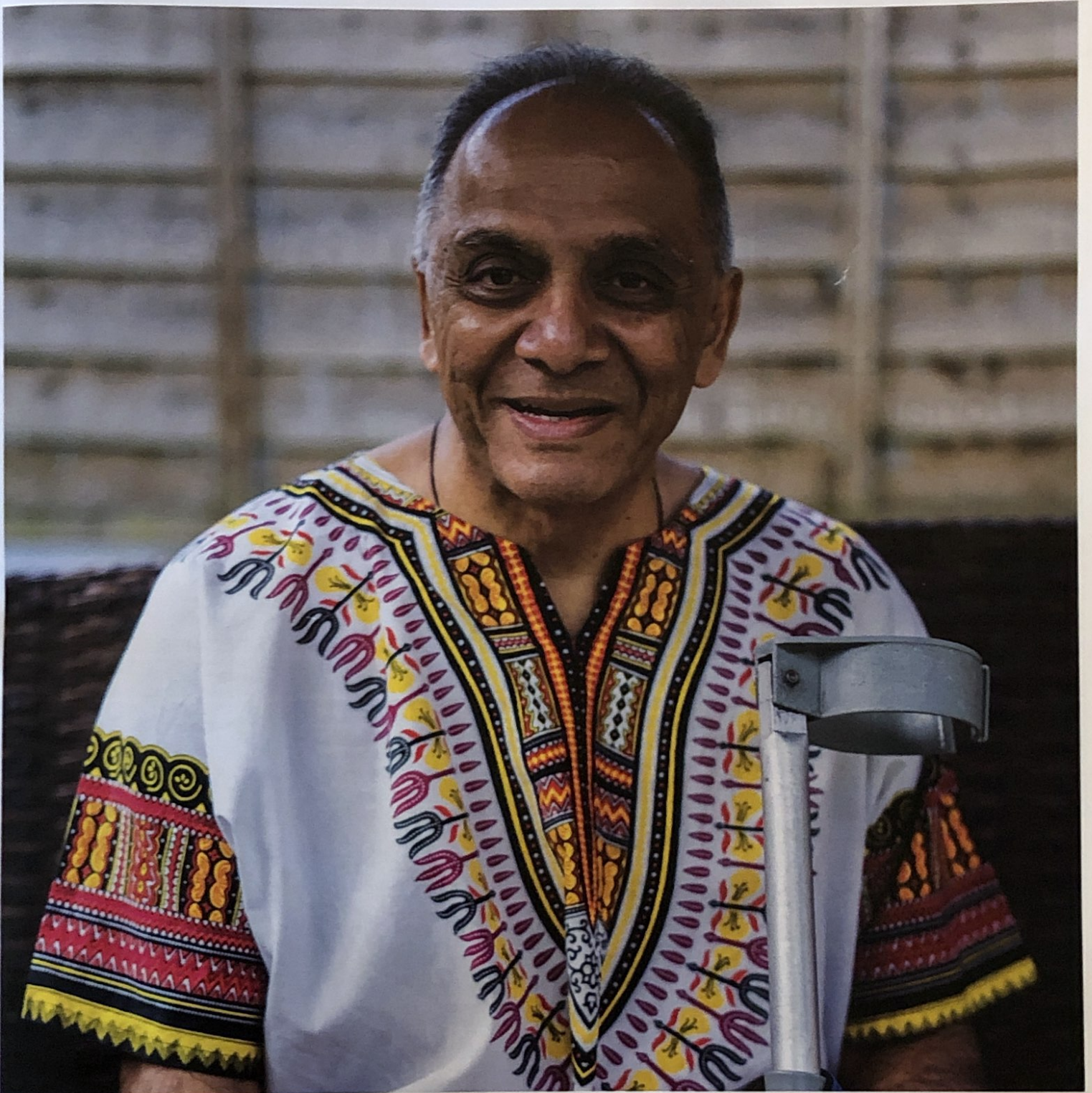


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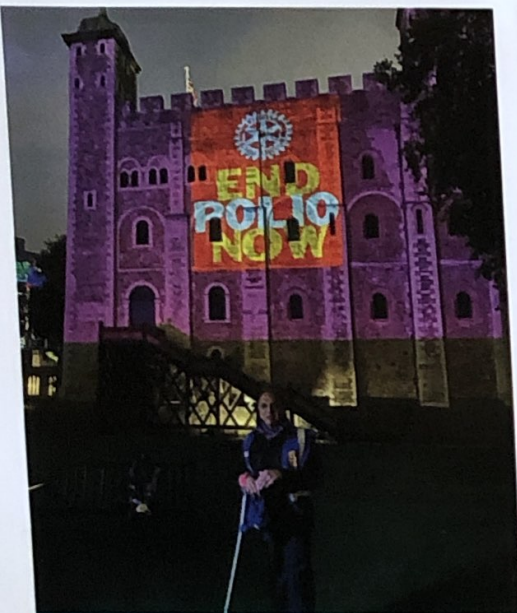
The official magazine of The British Polio Fellowship

NEW YEAR 2022



Twenty Minutes with Arun Patel

Twenty Minutes with Arun Patel...



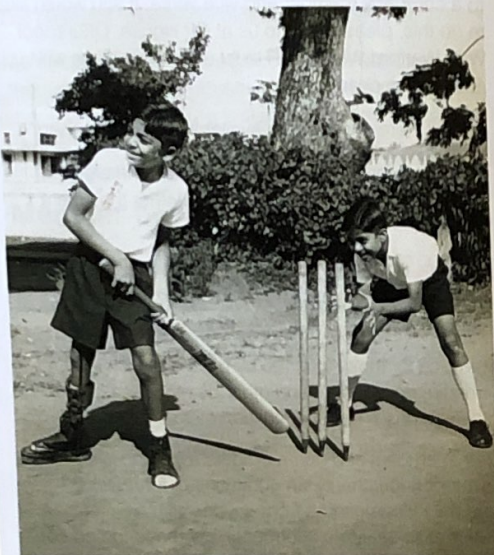
Arun Patel

The bulletin: Arun, thank you for taking the time to speak with us let's start at the beginning. What can you tell us about your early life and how you contracted polio?

AP: I was born in Mbale, a small town in Uganda which was then under British rule. My parents had emigrated from India and my father was a teacher.

In 1954, aged one, I was struck by polio. My parents were devastated as no one knew anything about polio then. I learnt about their challenges (and mine) during my first five years from a diary maintained by my father.

My own recollection of polio-related challenges started when I joined my primary school. I was abused verbally, overlooked for any sporting events and generally ignored or run down by other kids. Fortunately my father was relentless in finding a "cure" and forced me



to walk. It made all the difference because it helped me to rise on my feet and make an effort to make my presence amongst the others.

I did not feel singled out nor isolated.

The bulletin: Having polio from a young age in Uganda, this must have had a major impact on your childhood as many of our members can relate to. Can you tell us how it affected you and the challenges you had to overcome in your school years?

AP: In my primary school with over 2,000 students, I was the only one with polio. I had a choice either to remain wounded with my polio or do something to be accepted by the majority.

I realised straightaway that to be noticed favourably by the able-bodied I would have to "go the extra mile". It started on the cricket field where I would agree to open the innings, stand in very close (and dangerous) positions whilst fielding, take up spin bowling and be enthusiastic and pumped up. That increased

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my confidence levels and having notched up little successes on the cricket pitches; I carried a similar mindset to venture into other facets of my life like academia and later on at work, in business, charitable activities and travels. Fortunately for me, life became a lot easier and manageable from my secondary school years onwards.

The bulletin: You speak in your book about the first time you visited India and saw children living with the effects of polio. How did this affect you and begin your journey in starting your charity Polio Children?

AP: In late 2002, after I had seen nine polio afflicted kids from India who had come to the UK to participate in a sports tournament for the physically disabled. A few months later when I visited their school in Rajasthan, India, it impacted me in two major ways.

For the first time in my life (aged 50) I felt completely at home and highly excited to be with so many polio

survivors. It was a strange feeling of being liberated from the world dominated by the able-bodied. I did not have to hide my polio anymore.

I also noticed that the place, though lively and friendly, lacked basic necessities like adequate food, power, running water and a chance for further education. I was not going to walk away from that situation so with the help of my two brothers, Shirish and Mayoore we set up in the UK and the USA, Polio Children (later changed to Polio and Children in Need Charity). Polio Children is a charity dedicated to the educational, nutritional, and vocational wellbeing of physically handicapped children.

The bulletin: Can you tell us more about the great work Polio Children do across the globe?

AP: Polio Children started its main project of constructing a girls' hostel for over 150 polio afflicted girls and providing financial support for university education and vocational training to these disabled children. **▶**



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It has to date helped more than three thousand children directly and provided further university education facilities to more than 300 students.

Polio Children has supported the construction of two secondary schools in Cambodia providing free education to over one thousand students.

In Uganda, Polio Children is nearing the completion of a school and an orphanage that will cater to the needs of over two hundred children.

Currently, we are undertaking to supply 50,000 good quality text books to seven Caribbean islands that will benefit over 22,000 students.

Today, Polio Children operates more than twenty-five

projects and in eleven countries around the world. This has only been possible with the support of hundreds of well-wishers and volunteers.

The bulletin: What plans for the future do you have for yours and Polio Children's work?

AP: Our goal is to construct many more schools and at least three orphanages across the globe within next five years.

The bulletin: You have recently published your book *Out of my way Polio!* What inspired you to share your story with the world now and what would you like readers to take away from your book?

AP: During the COVID pandemic I was debating



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whether I should share some of my life experiences with those having similar challenges as me. Anne Wafula and Victo Nalule, two ladies, both polio survivors and wheelchair bound reminded me very emphatically "Arun, you have no choice in this matter. You owe it to the polio survivors."

Once I started writing the script, I realised that polio was a mere metaphor for the readers as far as the book was concerned. For both the disabled as well as the able-bodied, life presents many challenges of all types and it also offers innumerable opportunities not just to survive but to thrive.

I believe I have adequately conveyed that message in the book *Out of My Way Polio!*, judging by reviews and feedback the book has received during the first five months of its publication. The book has received more than 100 five star reviews.

I suspect that my primary message, "Live your life to the full, and don't let any challenge deter you" must have resonated not only with disabled folks but with able-bodied people as well. For those BPF readers who would like to read the book, I have a special offer for them as outlined in the poster in this edition of *the bulletin*.

The bulletin: We were very lucky you agreed to join us to talk at our November Zoom Café. How important, do you think, is it that polio survivors have physical and virtual opportunities to speak and support others with shared life experiences?

AP: As mentioned earlier, for me, meeting the 250+ children with polio in India was a life changing event. Likewise, British Polio Fellowship's facilities and opportunities for polio survivors to meet their peers would present them with invaluable support and understanding that would be priceless. Only polio survivors would fully understand the plight and the predicament of fellow survivors.

The bulletin: At the meeting you mentioned that you are now being affected by Post-Polio Syndrome yourself, what challenges has this brought you and how do you continue to push forward despite them?

AP: Polio, my unwanted companion has been slowly but surely winning its battles with my physical health. Initially stricken in my right leg, the paralytic effects of polio have spread to my left leg and both upper extremities. My mobility has been curtailed to the point that I need a wheelchair. It is however imperative for me to remain fit, both mentally and physically. I am determined not to give in to those symptoms. Swimming three times a week, coupled with regular daily practice of meditation and other techniques to enhance my life energies, keeps me in shape to the point that I can still travel to visit the numerous sites where Polio Children is operating. I also drive a specially fitted SUV.

The bulletin: As polio is thankfully eradicated in more and more areas how important do you think it is that more focus is given to those living with the effects of polio and Post-Polio Syndrome in later life and what are the biggest challenges facing this?

AP: Polio has become a forgotten disease as the number of cases of polio worldwide has dwindled. But to make sure that those children unfortunate to have contracted the illness are not forgotten, we set up Polio Children charity.

However one of the most frustrating aspects of running Polio Children has been the public perception of polio eradication being synonymous with relieving polio sufferers of their ailment.

The health authorities need to be educated about after-effects of polio, called Post-Polio Syndrome, as those are unique to polio survivors only. If that can be accomplished through the right channels, many of the challenges that we have to face in respect of PPS could be overcome.

The bulletin: Thank you for taking the time to talk to us today, Arun. It has been a real pleasure to hear about your life and the great work you do. We wish you and Polio Children the best for the future. 📺

Out of My Way, **POLIO!**

Out of My Way, Polio is a book about how Arun managed to face and overcome many challenges and how he turned most of those challenges to his advantage.



ARUN PATEL

OVER 80 Five **star** Reviews ★★★★★

“Inspiring...highly motivating....remarkable achievements.....Must Read.

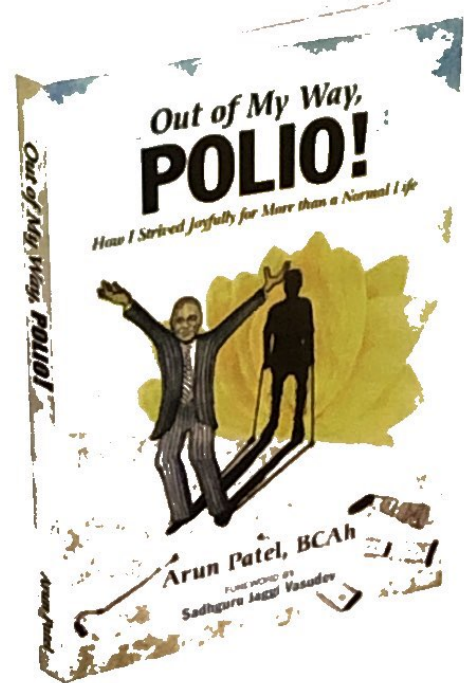
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