

# TRANSFORMING NARRATIVES

BANGLADESH | BIRMINGHAM | PAKISTAN

*This work has been carried out by Aftab Rahman, Legacy WM to discover narratives within the British Bangladeshi artist community in Birmingham, to update our understanding of contemporary culture, people's engagement with the city and experience of the city's cultural life. [Find out more](#)*

## Consultation with the Bangladeshi community

### Summary

The consultation was attended by 13 people. We invited 30 artists and we had three apologies. The arts scene in the Bangladeshi community in Birmingham is relatively small with only a handful of artists. Mohammed Ali is the most established artist from the community – however, his art has a wider appeal. Nilupa is an emerging artist and she uses her Bangladeshi heritage to develop her art. The Bangladeshi population in Birmingham accorded to 2011 Census figures is 32,532 and the current estimation is around 40,000 with a youthful community. Aston, Lozells, Smallheath and Sparkhill has the highest concentration of Bangladeshi people. The Coventry Road has the highest concentration of Bangladeshi businesses and recently Purbanat has opened a rehearsal space. The area is vibrant with grocery shops, restaurants and café's. The Bia Lounge is based there and the community use that community and arts events. Aston and Lozells also has a vibrant Bangladeshi footprint with businesses. Iqbal Banqueting Hall is where most of the community and arts events are hosted.

Some of the key findings were a lack of support for aspiring artists. Of the 13 people, only two had successfully obtained public funding. Sheikh an aspiring film maker, self-financed all his projects along with Makbul. They would like to apply for funding, however, they don't like the 'red tape' that comes with it. Afsana expressed her concerns at the lack of opportunity and respect for poetry. She said that there should be more support for people like her....she didn't realise that she could apply for funding as an individual. Some of support is being provided by Purbanat and Aftab. In regards to the recommendations from both groups, they have similar threads; more networking opportunities with a Bangla Arts Forum, a multi art form day and access to the arts. A short video of the event is in the process of being completed and it will be shared as its ready.

Part of Legacy WM role as a Community Facilitator for Transforming Narratives is to create a data base of Bangladeshi artists from Birmingham. A data base has been created with 31 artists from various disciplines. We will continue to add details of new artists as they emerge. A consultation meeting was held on the 12<sup>th</sup> June at 530pm with a back stage tour of The Rep. We were given a tour by Stephen Ball the Associate Director of the Rep and he explained that they are in the early stages of planning to develop a play to celebrate 50 years of Bangladesh.

This excited all the participants. After the tour we went to Celebrity restaurant on Broad Street for the consultation.

### **Findings**

Aftab Rahman the Director of Legacy WM led on the consultation with the support of Ahmed Ali. The consultation was filmed by Sheikh Shahnawaz who is a local film maker from the Bangladeshi community. Aftab welcomed all the guests and spoke about the plans for the evening. Sophina Jagot from Transforming Narratives was invited to give an overview of Transforming Narratives and their plans for the future. We had 13 participants and the group was divided into two; one was led by Murad Khan from Purbanat and Ahmed and the other was led by Sophina and Aftab.

All participants were asked to briefly introduce themselves and share their artistic journey with the group. The artists ranged from film makers, poets, singers, writers, visual arts (sculpture, mural, carvings, props for stage making, actors, directors and photographer. One of the participants, Zunab Ali has a poor command of English and the discussion was translated to him. The participants were asked six questions, with the final one being recommendations.

### **The first question, was how often do you attend arts events and where do you go?**

The response was varied as some said that they went on a weekly basis, whilst others attended events on annual basis. Afsana attends arts events on a weekly basis and is part of LBTV (Bangladeshi Cable Channel), she is keen to preserve and enrich the communities arts / heritage and share it with a wider audience. Zunab said he attends Mela's and the Nowka Bais at the Edbaston Reservoir. Other members attended community events and cinema on a regular basis. Most of the participants attend events in community venues, mela's and the Nowka Bais. Mainstream arts venues were not mentioned, besides the cinema.

### **Can you explain your journey through the arts world and any challenges that you faced?**

Some of the challenges people faced were people's perception of the 'arts' and negative stereotypes within the community. A lack of available funding and access to audiences was raised as an issue. Afsana said that it's hard to retain people's interest in poetry as they don't place much value in it. They see singing as more of an art form. Shanty explained that she lacked confidence when she started writing, but she was able to produce her first play with the support of her youth club. However, she has new challenges now, being a mother with two young children and job she struggles to find time to develop her art. Junab has put his art on hold at the moment, as he is focusing on raising his family. Sheikh's challenges are finding time to be creative. He did not wish to apply to British Film Institute (BFI) as that has too much 'red tape'. He prefers to finance his own work and has made several short films and posted on Youtube, some of them have had over a million views. He is presently working on a feature film, again self-financed.

Mokbul's journey in the arts started in Bangladesh when attended Dhaka University on an arts course. After completing the course he became a camera man in Bangladesh and worked in NGO's. Since arriving to the UK, he studied an MA in Social Work and that was his main

profession and on a part time basis he has made several short films. Several of his films have won awards in Bangladesh and in Cannes. He is also makes commercials for Bangladeshi channels and has made over 350. The challenge for him is to enjoy his creative skills; 'I am waiting for my children to grow up, so I can have more time for myself'.

### **Has anyone supported you on your journey?**

Feedback from some of the participants on support they received was from friends, family, colleagues, community and Purbanat. Purbanat has created a platform for artists to perform over the last six years. Afsana was an award winning child artists in Bangladesh and she has been given a national award by the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina. She has spent the last ten years in Germany and has recently arrived in to the UK and is developing her arts career; she has been supported by Purbanat and her husband. Shanty and Sheikh have been supported by Aftab to develop their skills.

### **Have you ever applied for funding?**

Mokbul received £5,000.00 from Awards for All, some years ago – he has not had any support recently. He has submitted his work to BFI and it has always been rejected, he feels there maybe nepotism and a lack of cultural awareness when it comes to South Asian films. Murad from Purbanat has had two small grants from the Arts Council and he has applied to the Elevate programme. He was also successful with funding from Awards for All, and Heritage Lottery fund as small grants. He has ambitions for Purbanat to become a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) in the future. Most of the participants have never had funding. Ahmed has established a new arts organisation and has applied to Awards for All and Positive Futures and is waiting for an outcome. Afsana didn't realised that she could apply for funding. Shanty has never applied for funding. Sheikh felt that the six month wait time means that you lose the creative edge...you have an idea and you want to run with it. There was a view that fund raising takes too much time and that most of the people don't have the skills set.

### **What is the current state of Bangla arts in your view?**

Murad's group expressed that there were a lack of people in the arts and those that were in the arts are struggling to be recognized. There is a lack of a platform to showcase talent and the 'arts sector' is not being recognized as a profession. Zunab said that there were only a couple of Mela's a year and the annual Nowka Bais – not much else. Afsana shared that there was a lack of quality in the arts sector and support. Mokbul said that there are different layers of arts in the community, there is a section that participates in traditional Baul music that starts at 1 or 2am in the morning; they are usually held in banqueting halls or large restaurants. Sheikh mentioned that Bangla arts need to be accessed by all factions of the community and his films are not focused on the Bangla community...he is an artists from that community and his short videos have a wide appeal. There was only two / three recognized Bangladeshi artists, Nilupa Yasmin and Mohammed Ali are the most notable. Mokbul said that the arts scene in Dhaka is very vibrant at the moment with a lot of investment from within the country and some investment from Japan.

### **Do you have any recommendations?**

There needs to be more awareness and access to the arts sector. Zunab would like to showcase more work from hidden talents in the community. The group felt that there should

be a data base and more sharing / collaboration from a cross section of the arts community. Shanty suggested that there should be more arts opportunity in youth clubs to engage young people from an early age. Sheikh said that it would be good to have a 'Bangla' arts day with a multi art form being showcased. Ahmed suggested that there should be a network for artists to come together on a regular basis to share ideas and learn from each other, 'Bangla Arts Forum'. There needs to be a dedicated lead to take this forward, someone to champion the sector. Murad said that there should be an arts school with connection to Bangladesh. Mokbul suggested that we should have a virtual centre.

**Top three recommendations:**

Below are the top three recommendations from Murad's group.

- 1) Alternative arts School
- 2) Regular showcasing arts activities
- 3) More connected/networking

Aftab's group top three are.

- 1) Bangla Arts Forum
- 2) Multi form arts day
- 3) Awareness raising and access to the arts

**Report by Aftab Rahman – Director – Legacy WM**