TRANSFORMING NARRATIVES

BANGLADESH | BIRMINGHAM | PAKISTAN

EMERGING THEMES FROM COMMUNITY FACILITATION SHARING
(1 July 2019)

1. COMMUNITIES WITHIN COMMUNITIES

- It is problematic to think of 'Pakistanis', 'Kashmiris' or 'Bangladeshis' as bounded groups or "monoliths" since this ignores internal differentiation and individual experience. It was noted that statistics for participation and representation in the arts for Pakistanis, Kashmiris and Bangladeshis do not currently exist since BAME audience segmentation is too broad (in fact, the problem itself may stem in part from the existence of the very broad 'BAME' category). When considering audience and artist monitoring policies and practices for TN, we should instead think of these groups as communities within communities, thus deepening our understanding of the depth and range of different subcultures which these audiences draw on to conceptualise their multiple identities. As Aisha Mahmood's report emphasises, identity is "much more dynamic and in flux, than static or fixed".

  "There is not just ONE community. Given their diversity, it would be fair to describe them as a 'community of communities'. Institutions haven't yet scratched the surface and aren't engaging with people to understand the nuance. Engage with different types of South Asians - Young, old, rich, poor, educated or not." (Mukhtar Dar)

  o Few Pakistanis refer to themselves as such, preferring instead their regional identity, i.e. Kashmiri, Punjabi, Pathan, Balochi etc. Different regional identities should be taken on board, since this is a key influencer of cultural identity (each region has its own distinct folk tradition and dialect).

  o Kashmir is cosmopolitan – the difference in languages, religious identity and cultural representation is vast but in the case of Birmingham, the majority of Kashmiris come Mirpur district with same language, culture and association with homeland.

  o The climate of Muslim backlash has resulted in Muslim communities asserting their faith identity as well as the politicisation of this faith identity. For many, religion is the strongest influence in shaping their family's cultural practices which for a minority can result in "narrow" interpretations of Islam and discouragement of art forms like music, drama and celebration of culture (report by Shefaq Hussain).

  o It is worth making a distinction between settled and newly arrived migrants from the same country, since each will have different starting points, different experiences of British life and may engage differently with arts and culture. Crucially, they may also have different priorities.

2. GENERATIONAL SHIFT IN ATTITUDES TO HOMELAND

- A clear distinction was apparent in the way different generations connect with their roots. Older generations who were born in Pakistan, Kashmir or Bangladesh have a nostalgic relationship with "the homeland". Moreover, this nostalgic relationship is based on PERCEPTION rather than the REALITY of the

situation in the home country - symbolic perhaps of an INTERNAL, emotional connection rather than the EXTERNAL and physical.

- This attitude impacts their identity and their view of the role of art. Mukhtar Dar reported that for the <u>older generations, art provides "a sense of cultural continuity, a link with home, history and the past"</u>, something which these respondents feel is missing from mainstream art, therefore making it irrelevant. Furthermore, they see art as a vehicle for passing on their cultural heritage to their children. It's perhaps for this reason that older generations (speaking to Aftab Rahman) stressed the value of community events like melas, Nowka Bais as well as national days (which present an opportunity for patriotism).

  "There is always a deeper sense of satisfaction when the event relates more closely to our own personal background and experiences." (Male respondent, quoted in report by Mukhtar Dar).

o Aisha Mahmood however reported that those born in Birmingham (younger generations) had no sense of nostalgia with the homeland, and were not attracted to such cultural programmes - in fact, they found them to be "cheesy" and "out of date". Most research participants identified as some variation of British Asian (British Pakistani, British Bangladeshi, British South Asian), i.e. using a hyphenated dual identity marker, which highlights the trend among the youth of diasporic communities whose practices cannot be contained by assumptions about their roots.

3. **RELEVANT NARRATIVES FROM WITHIN**

- All participants, young people especially, want to be <u>culturally visible</u> and seek <u>relatable narratives</u>, not only to feel connected to the different aspects of their identity, but also to inform their own sense of self.

- There is a desire for <u>balanced portrayals and 'every day' representations</u> of people from their communities "living their lives"; the emphasis being on the ordinary rather than "comical stereotypes or negative tropes". Aisha Mahmood reported young male participants referencing narratives which portray BAME men as 'groomers or terrorists' in the news, and being cast by the media in similar roles.

  "Please put more shows about Pakistanis and tell their stories like you do of white people and ordinary stories, not just bad ones about us as terrorists and religious people."
  (Respondent quoted in report by Mukhtar Dar)

- Researchers reported a huge appetite for <u>accurate representation of South Asian history and the experience of migration, told from within, i.e. from a South Asian rather than the colonial perspective</u>. This was particularly the case with parents (British born and otherwise) raising children in Birmingham. For instance, Musurat Dar reported women's frustration about the lack of spaces where they can take their children to teach them about THEIR history from THEIR perspective. Aisha Mahmood's report articulated a similar desire from young people wishing to learn about their roots. Implicit in this hunger is the wish to <u>instil pride in their rich social and cultural history</u>, particularly at a time of lazy stereotyping of British Muslims, to offer the younger generation a renewed sense of identity, better equipping them to navigate their place in Britain today.

  "I would like to see far more in terms of our history in museums from our perspective and not a colonial 'orientalist' perspective. I want to see exhibitions which show how advanced our histories were and also the negative impact of colonialism." (Pakistani female respondent quoted in report by Musurat Dar)

  "If you continue to deny us opportunities and access to resources; if you stereotype us; if you ignore inequality; if you allow others to speak for us, we will not be your audiences." (Pakistani female respondent, quoted in report by Musurut Dar)

- Young respondents talked about "ground up representation" in terms of their desire to be included behind the scenes in arts organisations, to ensure they are <u>included not just in terms of what's presented but also in the decision-making process</u>. This involvement could go some way to allaying criticism from adult audience members and artists about the <u>lack of religious literacy and cultural competence within arts institutions</u>.

4. LACK OF VISIBILITY OF BANGLADESHI ARTS & CULTURAL SECTOR

- The scarcity of Bangladeshi artists in Birmingham was noted during the R&D Sharing Day, as was the need to focus on artists operating "below the radar". There is a <u>clear need to formalise the work that is currently taking place</u>. Legacy WM have created a database of the 31 Bangladeshi artists currently operating in Birmingham and will continue to add new artists as they emerge. This further highlights the sporadic nature of the sector and the potential to support existing work through formalised networks and artist upskilling to increase visibility. A similar situation was highlighted in Shafaq Hussain's report on Kashmiri voice:

  > *"Don't give us money. Give us the skills that will enhance our development."*
  > (Kashmiri male respondent, quoted in report by Shefaq Hussain)

  > *"Do the mainstream know we exist, what we sing, play or do?"*
  > (Respondent from Azad Kashmir Folk group, quoted in report by Shefaq Hussain)

- Whilst aspiring artists expressed <u>concern about lack of funding opportunities</u>, it is probable that this is due to their own <u>lack of awareness about potential resources</u> and know-how regarding the application process. Aftab Rahman gave the example of an experienced Birmingham based film maker who has shot over 350 adverts for Bangla TV and won several awards for his films, yet he self-funds his work. Aftab's report also included the example of a Bangladeshi female poet who did not know she could apply for funding as an individual.

  o Artists make assumptions (not based on personal experience) which only serve to exclude them from the funding process, i.e. that they are <u>deterred by "red tape"</u> that goes with the funding.

  o <u>Lack of trust and lack of representation</u> play a role here too - as Aftab Rahman reported, they dismiss the opportunity because they think "it's not for people like them".

  o This is compounded by what is perceived to be "<u>Indian hegemony</u>" within the arts in Birmingham and the reasoning that the only BAME led non-white arts institutions are those established by BAME individuals themselves. Thus, artists (Bangladeshi in particular) don't bother applying for funding since they assume they won't be supported.

  o There is a <u>clear opportunity for TN</u> here to support this through <u>funding surgeries or mentorship</u>.

- Sections of Bangladeshi, Kashmiri and Pakistani communities <u>hold condescending attitudes towards the arts as a potential career</u> path, deeming the arts as "low priority" or something of a "luxury". The propensity of risk-averse BAME parents to encourage children towards traditional careers that increase social mobility is well documented. Indeed, one of Aisha Mahmood's respondents is estranged from her parents because of her pursuit of a career in the arts rather than a "more worthwhile path". Aisha's report stresses the need for knowledge of career paths, entry routes, role models (which of course require representation in the first place), thus lending credibility and legitimacy to this sector.

- For those not born in Britain and for many women with family responsibilities, <u>consumption of cultural activity equates to "socialising",</u> and tends to involve extended family and the broader ethnic / religious community, i.e. weddings, visiting relatives, religious activities, community activities. Thus <u>the very nature of their consumption, and the "self-created spaces" in which it takes place, serves to reinforce the invisibility of this activity</u> beyond the immediate community. That this activity is organised BY and FOR the community means it is also insular in nature. Programmes involving Bangladeshi folk music, again organised BY and FOR the community, are held in informal venues located within the community where attendees feel "comfortable", i.e. old cinemas, upstairs at restaurants, in private homes). However, successful events with good Bangladeshi attendance have previously taken place in mainstream venues in the centre of Birmingham. Artists stressed the key to achieving this is thoughtful marketing.

5. BUILDING TRUST

- The ongoing experience of inaccurate representation and institutional racism in combination with the current climate of increased 'surveillance' of British Muslim communities, has <u>heightened wariness about perceived 'hidden agendas' of any research</u> led by institutions which targets them. The consequence of this 'suspicion' is reduced motivation for engagement. This weariness and wariness are distinct from, albeit exacerbated by, the pervasive present-day anti-Brexit, anti-establishment malaise.

- In this uneasy climate, the <u>role of community facilitator comes with a burden of responsibility</u> since the researcher inevitably becomes the 'middle man' between the institution/project and the community - in essence, the community views the researcher as the 'face' of the project. Mohammad Ali explained in his report that asking probing questions raised expectations of the Bangladeshi community about possible outcomes, yet he was powerless to 'make any promises'. The resulting awkwardness made him question the ethics of his role as researcher - could this <u>jeopardise his hard-worn relationship with the local community</u>?

- This highlights the need for <u>thoughtful audience development work</u> - with "transparency", "integrity" and "active listening" - to take place alongside relevant programming as a means of building trust.