

**TRANSFORMING**

**NARRATIVES**

**BANGLADESH | BIRMINGHAM | PAKISTAN**

*This work has been carried out by Shafaq Hussain & Associates in response to a call out for a piece of work to discover narratives within the British Kashmiri 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](#)*

**Transforming Narratives – Kashmir Voice –  
Research Birmingham 2019**  
Shafaq Hussain & Associates

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

Transforming Narratives is a three-year project led by Culture Central with works towards Birmingham becoming a leading international centre for contemporary South Asian arts practice

The initiative expanded from its original remit to include Kashmiri communities.

The brief was to provide a profile, explore themes, interests and relationships with traditional cultures and country of origin for the community. In addition, the project explored what cultural forms Kashmiris most enjoy and capture an understanding of their life in Birmingham.

Research was undertaken through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods using an online questionnaire, face to face interview with the use of paper questionnaires and facilitated focus group session.

It emerged some participants spoke little English, others who could speak but were not able to read or write. This was reflective of Birmingham City Council's 2011 statistics record of Households where 23.1% of Alum Rock's population of 6,735 did not have person aged 16 and over who had English as main language and 21.9% of Bordesley Green's population of 3645.

This gave opportunity to use dual language of Punjabi and English, interactive; semi picture story and photo voice so participants could communicate their views.

There were 60 participants initially whose data was analysed and additional 12 participants who wish to take part in the process after our deadline. The methodology included seven focus groups involving 28 participants along with 6 online questionnaire surveys and 26 face to face interviews.

Focus groups and interviews were video and audio recorded and some participants consented to photos being taken.

A literature review was conducted which also looked at data on Kashmiris who self-identified as 'Kashmir' in the 2011 National Census. This was used to compare the presence and profile of Kashmiri community in Birmingham, however it should be noted that in absence of Kashmiri category on the form, most Kashmiris select 'Pakistani' as an available category.

This means the actual number of Kashmiris in Britain can only be estimated yet. The first estimation provided was by Roger Ballard in Economic and Political Weekly when he asserts: "Somewhere in the region of two-thirds of all British Pakistanis are in fact of Azad Kashmir origin". (P514, 1991). The other academic studies has supported this finding, for example Serene Hussain published figure as potentially nearing a million in her paper 'Missing from the Minority Mainstream' and Virender Kalra in this study 'Unknown and Unseen', state that , "over 99% Kashmiris in Britain originate from 'Azad' Kashmir". However, thus far this has not been verified.

The data of Kashmiris who self-wrote "Kashmiri" in 2011 census as there is no separate Kashmiri Category within the National Census. This was used to compare the presence and profile of Kashmiri community in Birmingham.

## **Key Findings**

- In regards to Kashmiri Arts provisions 98% respondents stated there was lack of Kashmir art forms available in Birmingham.
- During the research information dissemination, identifying potential participants and through individual interviews and focus groups processes people were very 'surprised' on being valued, with the focus on them and the Kashmiri community.
- 16% had attended Cannon Hill Park for Eid Mela but not for MAC specifically, others attended local centres for art activities , 68% women attended women only art form sessions at the women centre in Alum Rock, 62% men had attended Melas at Washwood Heath and Small Heath Park .
- Others were keen to share historical traditions carried on in England which evidenced the need for their culture and heritage to be conserved. For example "buying your own home" in England, was the Kashmiri tradition of being secure,

“naming Business after your father, mother or child’s name”, “sending money back home to build Koti” (House).

- “Hospitality”, ‘language’, ‘food’, ‘clothes’ came out strongly as a distinct feature of Kashmir culture and traditions.
- In the absence of Art forms, Radio, TV programming in Britain of Kashmir culture, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook are frequently used to keep in touch with country of origin, cultural ties such as music, art and developments. ‘Visiting’ Kashmir every year or more, ‘marrying’ children from families in Kashmir
- The keeping hold of language through art forms of singing ‘Galian’ (wedding songs), listening to Sufi music, storytelling and reminiscing emerged as ‘essential’ to keep traditions and culture alive. There was firm aspiration from self-help promoters to keep identity and culture alive by organising events to promote ‘Sufi wisdom’, local artists, encourage younger generations to take ‘interest’ and “preserve rich proud history”.
- The majority 92% of participants had never been interviewed in depth for research and needed support to understand the concept of Surveys.
- The recent figures estimated that there are over 200,000 ‘Pakistani’s in Birmingham and if this represents 75% Kashmiris then the Art sector provisions are not reflected.
- Life in Birmingham provided very positive responses “it’s the Best”, “our homeland now”, “Beautiful City”, “proud”, “wish more of our culture was put on ” and few negatives “rubbish”, “knife Crime”, “Unemployment” “things for younger people to do”

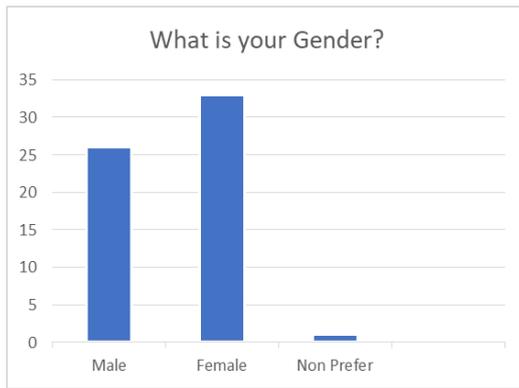
## **Key Theme Findings**

### **Profile**

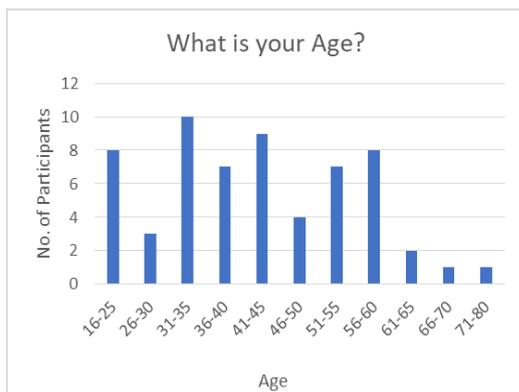
“Do the mainstream know we exist, what we sing, play or do” A. Hussain - Azad Kashmir Folk group

The 2011 Census Birmingham figure of 144,627 Pakistani and with only 29,403 Urdu speakers’ and associated towards Washwood Heath (3,463), Springfield (3,428), Sparkbrook (3,299) and Bordesley Green (3,283) locally known as Kashmir populated raises concern on the accuracy of the data. The 2011 census Birmingham figure also states 10,827 Pakistani Pahari speakers.

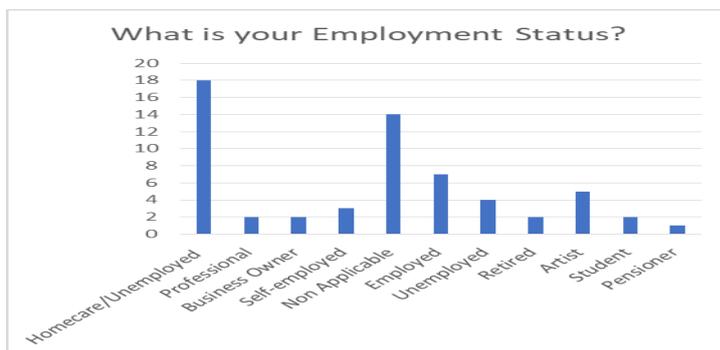
This is a surprising as Pahari language is only associated with Kashmiris and there is no description of Pahari as a language of Pakistan. This raises concerns on how equality data is accurately collected and monitored. The non-availability of separate Kashmiri category to tick or describe themselves contributes to the Kashmiri community confusion about their own identity and potential discrepancies in actual numbers. A recent freedom of Information result stated 43 people of Kashmiri heritage were recorded out of Birmingham City Councils over 10,000 employees.



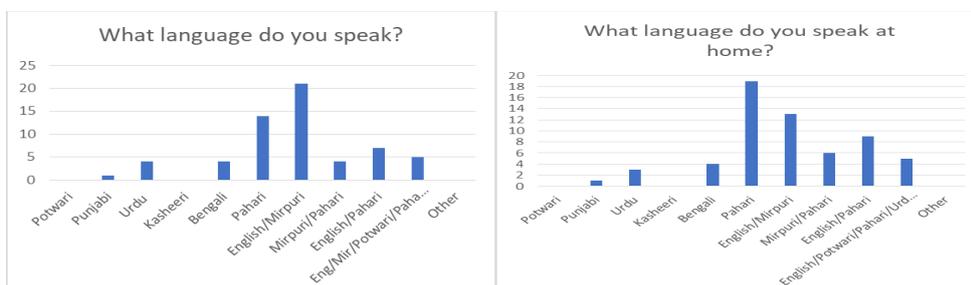
It was interesting, the gender description of 1 person not to say preference was done online and we were not able to gain any other information or their view on this choice.



We were able to get a good age representation and diverse experiences with early settlers from 50s to as recent as just over 1 year.



We wanted to seek economic background of participants especially to compare the affordability and accessibility issue for art forms.



We wanted to gain some understanding on how language and culture is associated and practiced. It was interesting to note some people were using Mirpuri as this was the language recognised and used by public and Health sectors. Some of the respondents were using Pahari and Mirpuri at home to 'conserve and pass on the language of my parents' to my children'.

### **Cultural Practices and Offer**

Respondents stated Art and culture is missed by just once a year Melas or Eid events.

There is 'self-help' organising of cultural events by the community but lack professional and financial support to reach to wider group such as women, families and the wider non Kashmir audiences.

Local artists reported that they wanted to learn and up skill themselves but were not given chances in local and major events in Birmingham as International and recognised artists were used. They were struggling to dedicate time to their profession due to earning living elsewhere such as Taxis drivers.

86% stated venues outside the community were not accessible for them and wanted art events at local community centres, libraries, women centres.

The events that are programmed that include Kashmiri artists were said to be expensive by 78% of respondents. 68% stated they wanted women only art forms such as jewellery, craft making, and embroidery workshops.

The only cultural practices available were weddings, birthday, Jamaal (hair cutting ceremony for new born child), Milaads, cinema or fund raising events as art forms. 96% stated they would attend if there were more Kashmiri art forms available.

There was acknowledgement that Birmingham was not reflective in terms of Kashmiri culture and presence of art forms. Only 7 people had attended Kashmiri 'associated' art events at the mainstream, 2 had attended a Kashmiri film at MAC, two attended Birmingham museum for a Kashmir Art festival in 2017.

Some respondents used cinema as a form of entertainment but reported mostly Bollywood or few Pakistani films screened, however the use of Netflix for other films and Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube for Kashmiri music and entertainment is used.

Kashmiri Voice and TN were promoted through lot of conversations; informal networking at shopping malls, garages, parks, outside school gates, visits to organisations, mosques, and sports centres estimated *to be* quantified to over 200 people.

Participants were very keen to share their stories on culture, identity, heritage, art forms, one example of a professional who completed his questionnaire with very brief answers later requested to be videoed. This resulted in the end spent a good 90 minutes covering in-depth topics.

## **Identity**

Kashmir women respondents likened early migrants as “sherneeyan” (lionesses) as they lived with 10 -15 other males with their husband in one household. These women contributed to other women being called to England by their husbands. Others referred women as the first ones who created ‘entrepreneurs’, ‘cohesion’ and ‘integration’ by having ‘white families’ living as lodgers to create financial security.

Others gave examples of how learnt art skills such as clay making were used to make ‘tandoors’ in gardens to cook chapattis, grill food and practice the old “Saad”(Call) tradition of gatherings to sing traditional ‘Gaalien’(wedding, party), Saif- ul- Malook (Journey of Love)- Kashmiri most famous Poetry and folk songs.

The first and second generation Kashmiris used art forms, traditional sports, cooking and clothing to preserve their identity and culture. Businesses have established recognition of their identity by the names associated to their ancestral homelands for example Dadyal cash and carry and Kashmiri jewellers.

## **Art Forms and Artist**

There was overwhelming recognition Art forms especially music, poetry, songs and folk stories of wisdom were part of Kashmiri culture, heritage, identify and were contributing to the preservation of language, traditions and as one artist stated ‘our distinct Pechaan’(recognition)

The majority of 60 participants, 96% that stated there are not enough art forms for Kashmiris in Birmingham and would attend art forms if there were local, accessible and reflected their culture. The focus sessions raised the lack of intervention by mainstream art organisations and exclusion of Kashmiri art form in mainstream offers was evident. Some respondents stated yearly Melas and few events at local venues did not reflect or do justice to the art forms.

On suggestion, how to improve art form offer, the respondents wanted more presence and profile of Kashmiri art form, the local artists raised support in ‘up skilling’, ‘mentoring’, ‘coaching’ and accessibility for development grants.

Other issues raised were artist having to work as taxi drivers to compensate profession, “there is still belittling and derogatory words, used to describe these profession and strong prejudice against some art forms based on association with Caste such as Dhall Playing. The increase of ‘orthodox’ interpretation of religious value where Art and Culture was

'forbidden' and actively been discouraged in certain areas was a concern for artist and participants.

Several suggestions were noted "Lady only events during the day due to childcare issues" "advertisements on social media", a comment to engage young people stated "More products should be produced from Kashmiri artists for YouTube, Facebook,"

## **Language**

The importance of language surfaced as one of the key findings for Kashmiris , the use of social media, You Tube, WhatsApp for Kashmiris to watch houses and streets in Mirpur.

Preserving Kashmiri culture and heritage through keeping and campaigning for language did not come easy for the first and second generation, there were major campaigns and pressure groups to campaign for this aspect of tradition, identity and culture to be protected and promoted.

The language of Pahari is one of the oldest in south Asia and its rich history goes back to 16th century but due to non-recognition it suffered development including its written form. The most significant way it sustained its existence and recognition was due to the famous Kashmiri poet Mian Mohammed Bakhsh who wrote and sang in pahari and its famous Saif – ul – Malook (Journey of Love) is world renowned poetry sang by most famous artists from south Asia.

The importance and its link to preserving of part of culture, pahari is spoken in Kashmiri households as one respondents stated "want to pass the langue of my parents to my children "

## **Recommendations**

1. It is recommended that all mainstream Arts organisations and partners include the Kashmir category in their ethnic monitoring systems so the services offered, delivered and take up is inclusive and help determine future policies, strategies and resources.
2. The Birmingham Kashmiri community and its organisations to work with institutions for specific study on Kashmir numbers and needs and how fairer monitoring systems can be implemented.
3. Creation of a Kashmiri Arts forum supported by mainstream Art organisations that creates networking, joint programming of Kashmir art forms, addresses language, culture and identity using local artists and participants.
4. Bespoke and special Kashmir events such as Kashmir Art Festival supported and offered by Mainstream organisations will help the Kashmir community feel 'included' and confident that its culture and presence is valued. This offer organised and

delivered in collaboration with Kashmiri art organisations will place equality of opportunity at heart.

5. Mainstream arts organisations to encourage Kashmiri artists to be mentored, coached, perform and attract 'bursary' and other grant support available.
6. Art Organisations help revive Kashmiri Art Festival to celebrate the diverse art forms and talents of Kashmiri artists.
7. Art organisations raise awareness in educational settings of Kashmiri culture, poetry and literature by introducing heritage enriched assemblies, Kashmiri art in the Community.
8. Art organisations through Transforming Narratives take up element of art form that they can offer as support in-kind contribution i.e. MAC free Cinema space for Kashmiri films
9. British Council and Transforming Narratives and Partners explore and encourage making Mirpur District a Hub
10. British Council and TN to invite special delegation from Kashmir to form part of their offer
11. Arts Council, British Council, TN and Mainstream Art organisations involve the Kashmiri Community in its Institutional structures, Arts offer and delivery of services.
12. Arts Council , British Council, TN and Mainstream Art organisations embed policies, strategies and performance target to support Kashmiri Art organisations engagement and access Institutions such as Birmingham City Council, DFID, Art Philanthropy Community
13. Art Council, British Council, TN and its mainstream art organisations should empower and support Kashmir Art organisations who are lagging behind other South Asian communities to offer diverse Art forms
14. Art Council, British Council, TN and its mainstream art organisations should empower and support Kashmir Art organisations that are facing challenges and increasing barriers such as 'narrow' interpretation of Islam and cultural practices from within some sections of the Birmingham community to discourage Art forms such as music, drama and celebration of culture.
15. British Council , Arts Council, TN and partners should explore previous Connections with Kashmir such as ' Birmingham Mirpur Friendship Treaty 'and British Council's 'Connecting Mirpur – UK' as foundations to build on or 'lessons Learnt' to pursue new collaborative initiatives.