

TRANSFORMING NARRATIVES

BANGLADESH | BIRMINGHAM | PAKISTAN

This work has been carried out by Mohammed Ali, Soul City Arts, to discover narratives within the British Bangladeshi 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](#)

Arts in the Bangladeshi Community in Birmingham

Report: July 2019
Mohammed Ali
Soul City Arts.

Executive Summary:

There is a large & growing Bangladeshi Community in Birmingham which is estimated around 50 thousand in 2019 while according to the 2011 census it was 32,532.

The study found that there is a mix of understanding in terms of what constitutes the art and the relationship between Art and Culture. In defining Bangladeshi Art and Culture the participants show a varied understanding. This concept also varies with the participants' educational and social status. For example, many referred to the literary work of Bangladesh as their Culture, where some referred to Bangladesh and its history and heritage as a reference point for their cultural background.

All participants acknowledge that being a migrant family they feel that they live in a vacuum where the only cultural practice they maintain is through their daily life, food, clothing and family custom. However, they also fear that this cultural line is now facing challenges from various angles. At one point the strongest factor was from the 'western cultural practice' but in recent years 'religion' is the strongest influence in shaping each family's cultural practises.

All participants agreed that they are happy living in Birmingham for its multicultural nature. They don't feel threatened by any dominant culture and they feel that they are free to exercise their own without any fear or stigma.

However, all participants also agreed that they are becoming more insular and are becoming less interested in what's happening in the city. They recognise this trend as a failure for the city, as there are no large-scale cohesion programmes bringing all cultural groups together.

Majority of the participants thinks that the gap between communities in Birmingham is increasing, thus as a community its own cultural practice, beyond direct family, is becoming less frequent and important.

All participants said that they relate well with their own culture but through observation and questioning there is a pattern emerging where the young participants seems to have a confused understanding of their own culture.

Majority of participants considers celebrating Bangladesh's National Day as their most important cultural activities in their yearly calendar.

Many participants spoke of cultural activity and gatherings are happening in informal settings, people's homes, wedding halls or on top of restaurant spaces.

Although most are more comfortable frequenting venues that are close by in their own local settings, usually within the Bangladeshi areas in Birmingham, if a program had enough appeal, they would travel into the city centre especially.

Traditional art and culture, eg folk music, seemed to have an appeal with the Bangladeshis that were not born in the UK. 2nd and 3rd generation Bangladeshis that were born in Birmingham were not attracted by such programs and found them to be 'cheesy' and 'out of date'.

One important discovery was that there were activities that were fragmented, with no sense of unity or coming together of creatives and organisations. For example there are two theatre organisations that do not seem to connect and work together. One of those is 'Purbanat' and the other is 'Theatre Bangla'.

What does the cultural life of the city have to offer them and where are there gaps they feel should be addressed?

- iv. What is their experience of living/working/studying in Birmingham?
- v. What do they like about their city and dislike?

Engagement in and with arts and culture

- i. Seek to establish what drives the demand for attendance and appreciation
- ii. Identify what genres and cultural forms they most enjoy and feel most connected with.
- iii. Identify issues they experience around participating in culture in the city

Methodology

This mapping exercise was undertaken by Mohammed Ali and Makbul Choudhury, who is also a Bangladeshi artist himself. We had a planning meeting where we discussed the purpose of the mapping and how we would like to conduct this exercise. We are both familiar with the art scene in the Birmingham Bangladeshi community, however, we wanted to keep it informal and offer participants the chance to express their personal views without an provocation or challenge. A set of questions was designed in line with the theme provided by the project management. It was decided that we will have a qualitative approach.

In terms of participants we included three groups of people:

- a) Artist 2) Audience 3) Cultural Activities

We prioritised to have a balance of gender and age however, in practice this was not possible to achieve within the scope of this study. However, we have maintained a strong balance of gender, age and orientation within our study.

We conducted this study via video recording and Pre & Post recording conversation with the participants.

The participants were asked supplementary questions in order to achieve a full and broader answer to an issue.

The Artist participants were asked additional questions about their subject area and their journey too.

The Video

We chose to edit a video sequence of the participants that capture the narrative quite comprehensively, instead of statistics and diagrams.

Here is a link to the film, a fuller and lengthier version is being developed.

View the film here:

<https://youtu.be/zlLUd2iLzMg>