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Foreword



Abdul Aziz Toki
Project Director

Following the success of **The Legacy of Women's Contributions in 1971**, Central London Youth Development (CLYD) decided to embark on its second oral history project. We encouraged our young researchers and volunteers to collect

information about their community from various public sources.

While visiting the Westminster Archive Library, they were disappointed to discover that very little resources existed. There were no substantial records of the history of immigration and the role Bangladeshi immigrants played in introducing cultural, social and economic diversity.

A prominent number of Bengalis settled in Westminster between the 1960s and 1970s, and sharing their stories is the focus of our project. Coming to a foreign land and calling it their home wasn't going to be easy, but they stood the test of time and today, the British Bangladeshi community is thriving.

Uncovering the Stories

As the hopes, fears, ambitions, and perceptions of life of our elder generation were not documented, we had to explore them first. It could not have been done without the help from our local communities, welfare clubs, politicians, and individuals who can make a difference.

Young members of our organisation took it upon themselves to explore the lifestyle of our parents and grandparents when they migrated to the UK.

We would like to thank the Heritage Lottery Fund, especially the grant officers, for substantial contributions for this project. Uncovering these wonderful stories was a team project, and we are grateful to the following people who supported our cause:

- Ms Karen Buck, Member of Parliament for North Westminster (Labour Party)
- Mr Ansar Ahmed Ullah, Director, Swadhinata Trust
- Mr Andrew Mederick, Director, Fourth Feathers Youth Club
- Mr Rory Lalwan, Senior Archives and Local Studies, Westminster Archives Library
- Mr Simon Ryder, Chief Executive, Beauchamp Lodge Settlement

The names not mentioned here are not forgotten. We are extremely proud and thankful for everyone's contribution and support.

Bringing the Stories to Our Youth

Our participants found the collection of oral histories of British Bangladeshis in Westminster challenging, but worthwhile. The project invited them to grapple with their dual identity of being British and Bangladeshi, and

what it means to be second / third generation immigrants. This process proved valuable in getting people from the second and third generations to interact with their elders and learn from their experiences. Participants, both men and women, were interviewed in English and Bengali so that the true substance of their stories could be recorded and shared with the world.

In addition, we interviewed people who interacted with that first generation of Bengalis, which provided us with a holistic perspective of their struggles and courage. We now have enough authentic information to share their stories.

Celebrating Life and Our Culture

I would like to add that Faces of Westminster is a community-led piece of research documenting the experiences of people who moved to the UK 50 years ago, with first hand perspectives of their settlement.

Although just a small sample, this book sheds light on some major aspects of migration, and how life as a Bengali Muslim and Asian in the UK has evolved in the past few decades.

Today, Bengalis, just like any other ethnicity, have their fair share of issues. At the same time, we have many reasons to celebrate our history, culture, heritage and legacy.

We feel very proud and grateful to our young people for gathering and preserving stories of their heritage, before they were lost for ever. We hope that future generations are inspired to follow in these footsteps and create unique platforms for these stories to be shared.

Introduction

Where is Bangladesh?

Once a key part of British India, Bangladesh is now a sovereign state in South Asia, located at the tip of the Bay of Bengal. The country is known for its rich cultural and ethnic diversity, and shares borders with India and Myanmar. Bengali, which is the national language of the country, is also spoken widely in neighbouring states in India.

Bangladesh is home to 166.2 million inhabitants, making it the eighth largest country in the world in terms of population, and the fifth largest in Asia. The country has a fast growing economy and is one of the major industrial and technology outsourcing service providers in the world.



Where is Sylhet?

Sylhet, the ‘spiritual capital of Bangladesh’, lies along the banks of the Surma River in the north-eastern region of Bangladesh. The city is known for its tropical climate, rain forests, tea estates, subtropical hills and river valleys, making it one of the top tourist destinations in Bangladesh.

Sylhet is also known as the ‘second London’, due to the increasing number of Sylheti Bengalis moving to the UK, particularly London, which now has prominent British Bangladeshi communities, including those in Westminster. Sylheti is the regional language and is primarily spoken in the city of Sylhet.

Where is Westminster?

Westminster is a borough in central London, located within the City of Westminster, along the north bank of the River Thames. Westminster is known for its historic landmarks, tourist attractions, and a culturally and ethnically diverse population. 14.52% of the population is Asian British (2011 census), making it the second largest ethnic group in the borough.

Westminster is known as one of the most well-preserved boroughs in London. It is home to several communities of people with Bengali ancestry. The borough now has a growing population of first and second generation British-Bengalis, who make up the second largest Asian-British ethnic group.

What did we hope to find?

The history of Bangladeshi migration to the UK has been of great interest to both academics and community historians,

with contributions such as ‘Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain’ by the Swadhinata Trust, and Caroline Adams’s ‘Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers’.

Although publications like this offer a useful foundation for subsequent explorations, *Faces in Westminster* offers a nuance in the turbulent story of Bangladeshis in the UK, in that it presents a voice of the community from a different part of London.

Previous studies focusing on the migration of Bangladeshis to East London, particularly the Tower Hamlets area, have explored the role of seamen or Lascars, and the prevalence of the docks in the lives and motivations of East End Bengalis. Shifting the geographical focus to Westminster offers an alternative reading of this community history, whereby we learn of the varied motivations for moving to and settling in Westminster, and the distinctions between them and their counterparts settling further East.

The main purpose of our research is to record the memories of Bangladeshi migrants settling in Westminster during the 1970s. We wanted to:

1. Fill the gap in knowledge about first generation Bangladeshi migrants who settled in Westminster
2. Understand the hopes and fears that Bangladeshi people had when settling and raising their families in Westminster
3. Hear female voices and understand how their experiences differed to their male counterparts
4. Understand how Bangladeshi migrants integrated into Westminster life and how they managed cultural differences

What we found

Below is a summary of some of our key findings.

Who came to Westminster and why?

Through 'Faces of Westminster', we have found that Bengali migrants who came to the UK in the 1970s were often economically motivated, especially young single men who made up most of the first arrivals. They were keen to support their families financially and seek educational opportunities abroad. Women often came to join their husbands who had arrived earlier. This challenges the assumptions made by some non-Bangladeshi historians and local people that the 1971 War of Independence in Bangladesh fuelled migration, or that Bengalis were here just to escape poverty.

Our interviewees didn't tend to give this as a direct reason for their decision to migrate. Our opinion from the stories we have collected is that the first generation of Bengali men sought opportunity - they came to the UK looking for an adventure. For the majority of them, returning back to their beautiful country, where the weather was always warm, the food was rich and the people were friendly, was always part of their plan.

Hopes and fears

We found that Bengali parents felt very hopeful about entering the UK. Although making money was a key factor, a number of Bengalis spoke of their distinct desire to educate themselves and their children. At the same time, they were also worried about the impact a British education would have on their new British Bengali children, that these children may 'forget' or even deny their rich Bangladeshi heritage.

When asked about this they often denied any fears, or simply gave brief answers. Although it is possible that they came here with many hopes and aspirations, we also wondered if there were any barriers preventing them from sharing these difficult stories. We found that women were more likely to share their experiences of personal distress than men in the community.

Stories of settling in Westminster

Some of the greatest struggles that Bengali migrants discuss are their living arrangements. Men spoke of the severe overcrowding, to the point that they were renting a bed in a room full of people for a few hours a night. Women often came later, when things were better, and were shielded from the worst of the overcrowding, joining their families when they had begun to settle and were able to make more private arrangements.

When we discussed employment, it appeared that in line with our predictions, the Bangladeshis who settled in Westminster mostly worked within the catering industry. Although it is often assumed that Bangladeshis only worked in Indian restaurants, the stories we uncovered show that they actually worked across a diverse range of cuisines. Another finding from our research was that individuals often started working from a very early age.

Many interviewees spoke of their worries about 'skinheads' and instances of racism and physical violence. Most of the interviewees reported that they were able to integrate well and got along with people of all backgrounds, though some also reported being affected by the tensions rife in that period.

Home away from home

Amongst the tales of hardship, a powerful theme which we identified was how supportive the Bangladeshi community was to one another. The Bangladeshi culture is collectivist, and Bengali migrants brought that with them to London.

They would openly approach other Bengalis to offer their support and share what little they had. Their stories share themes such as trust, loyalty, respect and care for the community and neighbours - traits we fear are gradually being lost as we become a generation more concerned with our own needs and that of our immediate families. People often spoke about family members and friends who were able to offer them a place to sleep and get on their feet.

The female perspective

Our findings also shed some light on how Bengali women functioned during the 1970s. As their husbands tended to work away, women were often left to run the home. This meant that they were in charge of caring for children and had greater interaction with the communities in which they lived.

A common misconception is that being a homemaker was a Bengali woman's only role. However, we have stories of women who worked a range of jobs such as sewing, in schools or even in a bakery.

Language

Although it was something of a barrier to integration for the Bengali community, language also helped unite the Bengali diasporas at that time. Language plays such an integral role in Bengali identity, and was the catalyst for the War of 1971 against West Pakistan. It was interesting to trace the role of language when Bangladeshis settled in Westminster. People encountered difficulties due to language barriers and we heard tales of the journeys

people had taken in order to learn the English language. Bengali migrants who understood English would often act as ambassadors and advisors within the community, helping others to fill in forms and access the services they needed.

Preserving the Bangladeshi culture

Bengali migrants wanted to preserve important parts of their culture and identities. For many, this most visibly manifests itself in food, clothing, language and religious practice. As second and third generation British Bangladeshis, we have been brought up with Bangladeshi cuisine available at home whenever we wanted it. For us, it has become the norm to have access to the rich foods of Bangladesh. However, this quality cuisine was not as accessible for first generation migrants. In fact, it was this generation's passion for food that established the curry in Britain and made it possible for us to have this beautiful part of our roots so present in our everyday lives.

Unlike Bangladeshi, men who largely adopted British clothing, women were more likely to continue wearing traditional outfits such as the saree or salwar kameez. Just as they have been able to preserve traditional Bangladeshi food, they ensured traditional garments are easily accessible for our generation.

First generation parents also worried that their children would not speak the Bengali language. Many parents encouraged their children to speak Bengali at home and took them on visits to Bangladesh so that they could experience the culture of their motherland and retain the language.

Despite parents' desires to retain Bengali culture, we found this first generation were also accepting of their children adopting parts of British culture, as they wanted them to integrate with the society in which they lived.

Islam

As second / third generation British Bengalis, Islam and religion has always been a prominent part of our identity. Things like prayer and observing Ramadan are woven into our lives and encouraged through friends and family and even on TV. However, a common theme shared by early Bangladeshi migrants was that access to Islam was more limited. As a result, it became rare that people would fast during Ramadan or celebrate during Eid. Islamic principles have strengthened through the generations.

The first Bengali migrants were settling in a new country where the culture and living standards were very different to their own. As a result, we found stories of great determination regarding the difficulties of nurturing children between two very different cultures.

These parents showed great dedication in teaching their children about Bangladeshi culture and the Islamic way of life, whilst also prioritising their children's mainstream educational needs. Given that this generation of parents did not tend to practice Islam as frequently and were not as fluent in English, it was surprising to hear how much value they placed in instilling these values into their children.

A perspective from non- Bangladeshi professionals

Speaking to non-Bengali professionals who worked in Westminster during the 1970s, we found a fondness for the Bengali community as they moved in and brought some of their culture and traditions with them. Local politicians and service providers were keen to help the Bengali community settle. They spoke particularly about integration, how and where it happened, and some of the barriers to it.

We also spoke with the migrants about services or organisations that supported people as they adjusted to Westminster. We found that people often integrated

via their children's schools – education was a priority and parents were encouraged to communicate with non-Bangladeshis. Schools tended to be receptive and accommodating to migrants of all backgrounds.

With time, those with little English became more able to live in the developing Bengali community without requiring meaningful interaction with their English neighbours. However, as they became more settled, some became more invested in local concerns. This led to some Bengali representation in the local council.

Stories of integration

Bengali children were mostly allowed to integrate with children of other backgrounds because parents understood that this was a part of their new environment. However, these same parents tended to strongly disapprove of marrying non-Bengalis.

Although cultural differences caused many parents to feel uncomfortable, some did accept the idea that they could not prevent their children from developing strong feelings for non-Bengalis.

Westminster has seen many changes across the years and is generally seen as being well developed with a strong infrastructure and a dense population. However, some families have been priced out and it is now seen as a wealthy area.

The communities have also changed; some Bengalis remain, but the Irish and Afro-Caribbean communities are mostly not around anymore, while a large Arab community has moved in.

Bengalis also have less of a presence in local jobs. However, there is now more diversity in the area and cultural festivals like Eid are celebrated by a wider population. Our interviewees feel some sense of community has been lost nonetheless. Many believe that the new generation treats

each other with less respect than before, citing attitudes on buses as a prime example, for instance passengers not giving up their seats for the elderly, or drivers not seeming to care for their passengers.

Where are their children now?

In the present day, these parents express great pride in their children, particularly as they see a young community of practicing Muslims. This is often considered an important marker of success for parents. There is also a general pride in viewing their children as equally Bengali and British.

Parents are especially positive about education and financial security. They speak about how their children have integrated with British life and begun successful careers in the UK. There are, however, fears of what will happen with the next generation, caused by uncertainty about how those children will be raised. The Bengali community longs for future generations to attain prosperity and success, while retaining some of the religious and cultural values of their ancestors.

The Bengali community in the UK is now established and remains close-knit. We wonder, however, if younger generations have lessened communication and travel to Bangladesh, maybe as a result of many of our immediate and extended family living in London. We can see from their stories that the first generation of migrants experienced the UK very differently to us. The Bangladeshi community continues to progress in the UK – education has been strong and the successes are paying off for many in a range of different fields. This is not the case for everybody, however, and many continue to experience a similar quality of life to their parents.

Methodology

The research and editorial team

Our team of young people are all of second or third generation British Bangladeshi heritage. Most of us grew up in Westminster or have a connection to the area. We bring with us a range of skill sets which we have used to explore this important era for British Bangladeshi heritage.

We are a group of volunteers who have sought to share the stories we have collected. We have tried to present our methodology and findings in the clearest form for all readers. We welcome corrections for future work and editions.

Sample

We recruited our sample of participants through the use of word of mouth - a method known as snowball sampling. Those of us who were raised in Westminster contacted our family members and relied on them to nominate other members of the community. This process allowed us to reach as many as possible within this unique population.

This technique means that the stories we have collected will not necessarily be representative. Our participants are

predominantly Sylheti speaking (a variation of Bengali) and Muslim. While this group made up the vast majority of this newly arrived community, they cannot speak for all Bangladeshi migrants settling in 1970s Westminster.

More regrettably, we didn't manage to recruit as many women to our research as we would have liked. Nonetheless, we have been able to uncover many incredible stories and hope they can be further explored in the future, particularly with women, non-Sylheti speakers, and non-Muslim Bangladeshis.

We would also like to highlight that none of the stories included in this publication have been verified as factual, through any external resources. We do not take responsibility for any of the claims made by the participants. Our aim was to collect stories from people's own memories. It is expected that discrepancies will occur between people's accounts.

Transcripts and translating

We conducted most of the interviews in Sylheti and then translated and transcribed them into English. This piece of work was conducted by a group of second generation British Bangladeshis.

Although we have tried our best to make sure the interviews have been translated as honestly and transparently as possible, it is likely that some of the true authenticity of each participant's stories will have been lost or even misinterpreted during the translation process.

Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and time constraints made it difficult for each interview to be translated by more than one researcher. However, we maintained good communication between ourselves and

discussed any stories that any member of the team may have struggled to translate.

Language plays a crucial role in constructing our knowledge of the world. The Sylheti language and dialect is very different to the English language, and we found that Sylhetis will often use the same word to describe a range of concepts.

For example, the Sylheti word 'chinta' can be interpreted in many different ways - 'worrying', 'thinking', or 'being afraid or concerned'. Therefore, each researcher who translated a document naturally understood the Sylheti stories through their own interpretation of the Sylheti and English languages.

We invite readers to read each quote with an open mind and explore alternative perspectives to each story, as this will enable you to appreciate the richness of each person's unique experiences.

How we conducted our research

We began our research process by bringing the team of young people together to discuss and develop the themes we wanted to explore through our interview questions. We then arranged relevant training sessions in order to equip us with some basic skills. We then developed and agreed an interview script based on this.

Following this, we contacted potential interviewees through our networks. We asked for consent to record and translate the interviews and use them in this publication. We used a Dictaphone, a video recorder, a pen and paper, and also held copies of our questionnaires.

We shared the interviews, transcription and editing duties across the team.

How we analysed and presented our findings

The editorial team read through each transcript to collect shared themes. We grouped the themes together and used this structure to create the chapters of the book. Time and resource constraints mean we have largely published the recollections from our interviews as they were told to us, without our own extensive analysis.

We hope that readers will take away a good understanding of the stories and their own perspectives about what they mean. As you will notice, a few of the stories will fall into more than one chapter. During the structuring phase, we discussed these recollections as a team and made decisions about where to place them.

Chapter one

Motivations for moving to London

We found that Bangladeshi migration to the UK in the 1970s was often economically motivated, especially the young single men who made up most of the first arrivals. They were keen to support their families financially and seek educational opportunities abroad.

Women often came to join their husbands who had arrived earlier. It is assumed by some non-Bangladeshi historians that the 1971 War of Independence in Bangladesh fuelled migration.

Our interviewees didn't tend to give this as a direct reason for their decision to migrate. We found instead that they were looking for an adventure and seeking new opportunities.

Mr Abdul Hannan: I came here to join my family and live a nice life. Bengali people who had settled in London would often visit Bangladesh during their holidays. They would spend a lot of money. This motivated me to come to London and be in that same position one day.

Mr Khalil Miah: My dad and uncle were very interested in this country so I thought it would be nice to come here. I thought by coming here I would have a nice life.

Alhaj Md Abdun Noor: In March 1964 my father had enrolled me into the local college in Bangladesh, but when I saw local people moving to London, I took the opportunity as well. My older brother had come earlier than me, and advised me to stay in Bangladesh and continue my study but I didn't listen to him. I came on my own, and then lived with my brother here in Westminster. Initially, coming to London was very exciting, but once I'd arrived it felt very different to what I expected.

My father asked me to stay in Bangladesh and continue with my studies and then get a good job. In fact, he told me that I was only allowed to come to London for five to seven years, after which I would have to return to Bangladesh.

I thought the same: I would be here for a few years, earn some money and then go back. I still keep that same thought in my mind, and wish to return to my country, but what can I do? I did not want to bring my family here, that is why they came much later than me.

I had no intention of staying here, so there was no point bringing my children here. But my family members and relatives put a lot of pressure on me, and convinced me to bring them here.

Mrs Anowara Begum: I came here with my husband. He

left Bangladesh and was very happy so he told everyone to join him. At the time I was 27. When I came here, there were a few Bengalis, I'd meet them on the streets.

Mr Abdul Sobur: I was very happy. I was earning money and was able to go back to my home country. If I had invested in Bangladesh then I would have to be there permanently and leave this country.

Mr Abdul Moobin: In 1963, after my graduation exams, before I'd even received my results, my friends had encouraged me to move to London. At the time I was looking for a job, as my education had come to an end. It was then that a friend told me about the UK. I thought I could have a better life. That is what inspired me.

Alhaj Lala Miah: I was studying in Bangladesh whilst my father was in the UK. One time he came back to Bangladesh and told me that he wanted me to be educated in the UK. That is when we made the decision for me to come. At the time, it was rare for family members to join their families in the UK. First I went to Birmingham, then I moved to South Wales. In 1968 I was 22 years old and moved to Westminster.

Mr Kobir Miah: I came because England was well renowned, it was an educated country and I knew I could improve my life by coming here.

Haji Arob Ali: In 1963 many people came to London, and news was passed on from one person to another. There were very few opportunities for us in our country at that time, so we were always looking for ways to be better off. We heard that the UK offered better employment and more opportunities to earn money.

Mrs Harisun Nessa: I never had plans to live here

permanently, I never even bought utensils or saucepans. My plan was come here with my children and show them a new country and leave. I bought one pan thinking I would leave it behind once I left the country. Really! In terms of me staying long term, once my children began to grow up and settle down, I knew I would never leave and that we would be staying.

Haji Fazar Ali: I started school and then started working. I came to London to make money.

Alhaj Uster Ali: I came to Britain because I have a big family. I was the second eldest of five brothers and three sisters. I came to this country because I believed by coming here I could help my family by putting my siblings through school and also supporting my country. I really thought about it.

Nobody told me to come here, and I wasn't young when I did. I understood that my life would be better if I came to London or America. I filled in the applications myself to come to this country. I arrived in London in 1963 and settled in Westminster in 1975.

Mrs Hosne Ara Moobin: I came with my husband. At the time I had no children.

Alhaj Abdur Rahman: When I was in Bangladesh, I had a shop and one day I went to town to buy some materials. It was then I noticed a big queue in front of the employment office. I got the address from there and wrote to the British High Commission.

Within a week, I received a letter to collect my voucher. Before me, only two others from my village had gone to the UK. Luckily, I was able to contact them when I arrived in October 1963.

My family's financial situation was not ideal, I was the only one supporting them. I owned a small business and knew it would not be possible to improve their quality of life through this.

Therefore, moving to London would mean that I could support my family and improve their lives. At the time I was about 22 years old. As my family's financial situation was not good, my priority was to put them first and thus chose not to marry before leaving Bangladesh.

Haji Surok Meah: It was a totally different environment. One of my relatives returned back to Bangladesh, but I had started working so I remained here. My parents and the rest of my relatives were in Bangladesh.

In fact, my parents were well off and they were strongly against me moving to the UK, but as I was desperate to come here, one of my uncles supported me and convinced my parents to allow me to fly to the UK. My father never asked me for any money; instead, he inspired me to become established here.

Mr Joe Hegarty: I know that the war in Bangladesh and independence in 1971 saw waves of people migrating for various reasons, and those most involved wanted to get away for obvious reasons. But there were also economic pressures because Sylhet is a tremendously poor area.

(Editors' note – Bengalis were economic migrants, and were not fleeing war or persecution. And Sylhet is one of the most prosperous regions in Bangladesh.)

Mr Guthrie McKie: To escape from poverty of course – the same reason I left Scotland.

(Editors' note – they were looking for better opportunities).