

# WE ARE ALL BROTHERS HERE

**SIDE**  
GALLERY

## Stories from the Bangladeshi Community

**PAUL ALEXANDER KNOX**

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Photographer Paul Alexander Knox set out to document the Bangladeshi community, rooted in the once industrial centre of his native Sunderland. 18 months on, he was staring down stacks of images. The edit didn't come easy. He kept coming back to the same question 'How do you make a portrait of a community when it is made up of thousands of individuals?' There is no one series of images to define the community, not one story that encompasses each person. Every question we asked got multiple answers; the oral history has been passed on by many with each teller bending it to the ear of each listener. As is the way with family. Most come from the same town in Bangladesh, as Abu Shama says, from 'the same bloodline'.

Sitting around the table at the Bangladeshi Centre, the elders tell us about their journeys to England. They were part of a wave of Bangladeshi men coming to Britain in the 1960s. Many worked their way here on the ships, arriving in the dock towns then spreading out across the country. Syed Ansaf Ali went to Amsterdam first but he wanted to come to England. When I ask why here, Omar, son of one of the elders, looked at us with a serious face, 'He fancied the Queen.' He cracked a wry smile. All the men laugh then spoke amongst themselves in Bengali. There was a warmth, an ease between the men. Abu Shama, the centre manager, bent the conversation back to the topic. 'England was familiar; the men were born when Bangladesh was India, under the rule of the King.' English reserve was compatible with Islam. It also had cricket.

Initially the men didn't plan to stay. They were young and out to see the world. Most planned to make their fortunes then return home to their families. They came to Sunderland in the 1970s to help out at the town's first Indian restaurant. Chain migration policies allowed each man to sponsor a friend or family member's entry into the country. 'Why bring our whole village? We got lonely.' Then after decades of setting up businesses, a change in the immigration law made it easier for the men to bring their families to England – they decided to stay. The families came in 1986. Many families now have two homes – one with their extended family in Bangladesh and one in Sunderland. Though the elders have a strong community here, several wish to see out their last days in Bangladesh.

The women's journey was different and continues to be so. Bangladeshi women tend to be more traditional here; more women wear hijabs and burkas in England while many women in Bangladesh go uncovered. When I asked why, they speak of the Qur'an, the wish not to draw attention upon themselves and the need to avert the male gaze. Then a silence falls. 'Because we choose to,' Nahida says, 'because we can.' The second generation watched their mothers come here trying to blend in, not to draw attention. They wore their hair tied with scarves and long jackets like all the other women queuing at the market stalls. That attempt to be the same made them feel more foreign, to themselves if nothing else. The second-generation girls went with their uncovered heads bowed, averting the English gaze. There was no point in covering as scarves would be pulled down by children in the streets, yanked by kids in the hall. The choice was not theirs. Now, they wear the hijab with pride. A mother herself now, Nahida fought for her

daughter's right to cover, talking with the school, she helped ensure that the hijab became a part of the accepted school uniform. Wearing the Hijab makes some of the women feel more respected, more accepted here, more British. In multicultural Britain they are allowed to cover their heads and not forced to cover their cultures. Though Paul had asked the women similar questions, these stories were conveyed to me; a woman, a mother, a fellow immigrant. There are brothers and there are sisters – each sharing with their own.

There are fewer women than men featured in the exhibition – many women chose not to be photographed, to not be caught by the camera's gaze. Syeda was one of the few who allowed photographs to be taken in her home. Her grandfather was one of the elders who first came to Sunderland. He helped to convert two old terrace houses into a mosque. That came later though – when he first arrived he used to have to place a painted stone in front of his door to find his home among the seemingly identical terraces. Syeda struggled to find her place as well. Though she was 'born and bred in Sunderland, she was also 'kicked and spat at in Sunderland.' Syeda encounters much less racism now as she negotiates her own life as a wife and a mother. She married Mahfuz who is Bangladeshi born. When she goes to visit her in-laws there, she brings a suitcase full of Hobnobs to stave off the homesickness. She took part in the project because she wanted people to see the Muslim Bangladeshi community as they are. As people.

The relationship between the community and the camera is complex. Though most welcomed Paul and his camera others saw the recording of their image on the spectrum between suspicious and haram or forbidden. Paul was asked time and again why, why was he taking these photographs – who were they for? These questions often followed hushed discussions with words like MI5 and CIA interspersed with Bengali. Everything changed after 9/11 Paul was told. Some chose to be photographed to counter the suspicion that mounts in both communities. Others chose to not be photographed because to make an image of a sentient being can be interpreted as haram, or forbidden by Allah. To frame, mount and then display that image could be perceived as an even greater offence. It could be seen as raising a person to the status of God, to make them an idol. Many in the community though, understood Paul's intent and what the outcome would be. Abu Shama, the manager of the Bangladeshi Centre, supported Paul in every way yet he wished to not be photographed. He was born in Bangladesh but grew up in the now torn-down Pennywell estate. He was the only Asian child there, growing up isolated and harassed. He is driven to help the community integrate into the wider Sunderland society, to help them no longer inhabit a city within a city. He wishes to be known by what he does and not his image.

The 4000 strong Bangladeshi community is a complex mesh of interlocked beliefs and bloodlines which now spans four generations. Paul photographed the people where they live, where they work and where they pray. He has worked to honour their generosity, to represent each person honestly beholding to no overriding narrative. He recorded each story as it was shared with him from the thriving community deeply rooted in both homelands – Sunderland and Bangladesh.

**Dawn Felicia Knox**



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