

About QueenSpark Books

QueenSpark Books was founded in 1972 as part of a campaign to save the historic Royal Spa in Brighton's Queen's Park from being converted to a casino. The campaign was successful and it inspired participants to start collecting memories of people living in Brighton and Hove to preserve for future generations. QueenSpark Books is now the longest-running organisation of its kind in the UK.

More than one hundred books later, as part of our 45th anniversary celebrations, we are making the original texts of many of our out-of-print books available for the first time in many years.

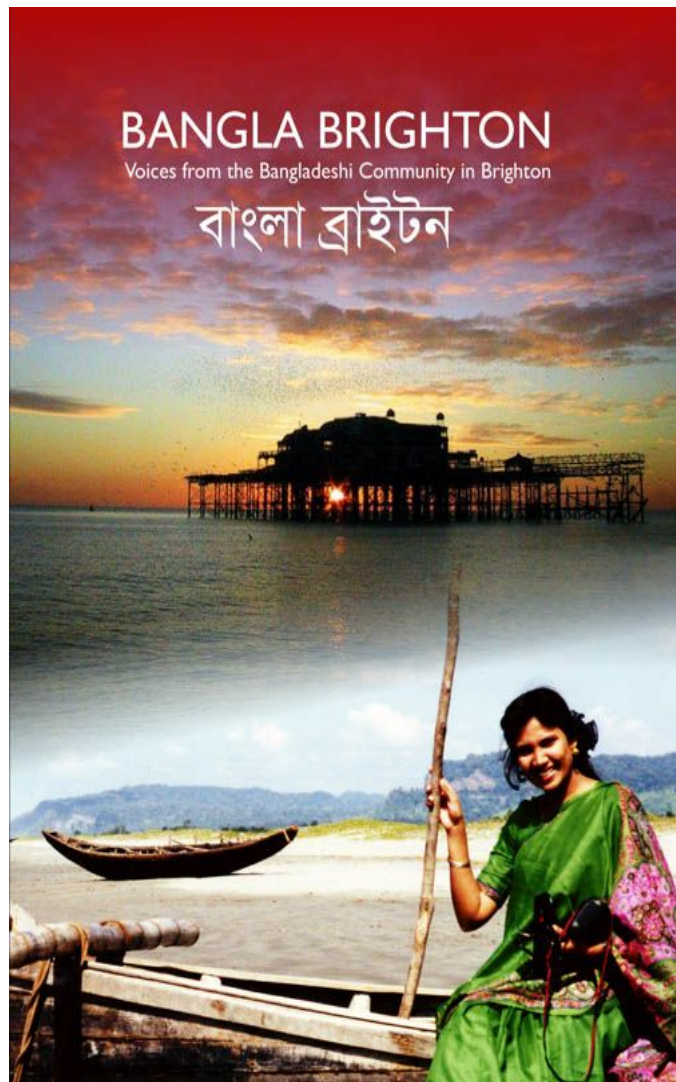
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About this book

As intriguing as it is informative, this 2006 book *Bangla Brighton* gives one of the lesser heard voices in our community a chance to be heard.

The contributors speak of making their lives in Brighton, memories of their homeland, culture and customs, their faith, day-to-day struggles, family life and the role of women.

Poetic and passionate, lively and lyrical, *Bangla Brighton* is a series of moving true life accounts of life on the South coast by Brighton and Hove's Bangladeshi community. At times heartbreaking, but always full of hope, these stories offer the reader a glimpse into a fascinating culture.



Original 2006 Foreword

Here, for the first time in print, is a celebration of Brighton's Bangladeshi Community. The stories and essays presented in this book were written, gathered and selected by members of the Community and have come from men and women, young and old and people from a wide range of backgrounds and viewpoints. The poems were written by Masuda Zuha.

Although the public face of the Bangladeshi Community, the face with which most people are familiar, is that of those who work in the food industry (Brighton has more than one hundred Bangladeshi restaurants and takeaways), most people have little idea or knowledge of the wider community – their occupations, their beliefs, their hopes and aspirations, and their social and family lives.

I hope Bangla Brighton will bring a greater understanding of the Bangladeshi Community and encourage people to find out more about this rich and vibrant part of Brighton society.

A brief word about language - many of the contributions presented here were written in Bengali and, unfortunately, no translation can do justice or more than hint at the poetic and spiritual nature of the original tongue.

The process of producing the material here has been intense, but also very rewarding. In achieving their goal of presenting this unique insight into the community and the experience of its members, the participants have uncovered talents and abilities, gained new skills and grown in confidence and self-esteem.

It has been a privilege and a pleasure to work with the contributors to this book and I hope readers will enjoy this collection of images, memories and feelings.

Safia Mohamud
Adult Skills and Learning
Brighton & Hove City Council

The Project

The aims of this project were to document and present memories, feelings and reflections from the Bangladeshi Community and bring together as broad a range of ideas and opinions as possible. The Steering Group, comprising six volunteers, made their own contributions both in writing and in a series of taped interviews. They also were responsible for taking the project into the community by working with friends, families and colleagues and helping them to record their experiences, anecdotes and opinions. From the contributions they gathered, the Steering Group then made a final selection and arrangement of the materials for this book.

The Steering Group

Irene Chowdhury

'I was born and brought up in England and lived in London and Worthing before finally settling in Brighton in 1985. I am married and have three children. I work for SEAL as a bilingual assistant in several schools in Brighton and Hove.'

Rahela Afsar

'I was born in Bangladesh but grew up in England. Since 1982 I have been living in Brighton. I'm married and have four children. In the last three years I have been involved in community activities. Between 2003-04 I took part in the 'Your Voice' research funded by Neighbourhood Renewal, Brighton and Hove. I have benefited from the Adult Learning opportunities in my neighbourhood and have gained certificates in First Aid, Food and Hygiene and other subjects. This achievement has boosted my confidence greatly. Currently I am a member of the Management Committee for Millwood Community Centre and work for SEAL as a bilingual assistant for pre-schools and primary schools across Brighton and Hove.'

Afroza Rahman

'I was born and brought up in Bangladesh. I came to live in England with my husband in 1973. I am married and have five children and two grandchildren. I am a housewife, but have always taken an interest in the education system and especially in areas where I feel I can help my children and my community. I got involved in my local school and I became the first Bangladeshi bilingual worker for SEAL.

I am very proud to be part of this project and share my story with the wider community. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.'

Masuda Zuha

'I was born and brought up in Bangladesh, and qualified as a teacher. I came to England in 1969 with two children to join my husband who was already working in Brighton. I now have four children and two grandchildren. I like writing poems but I have never had the opportunity to share them with other people. I am happy to be part of this project, it was an opportunity to work and meet with others and it has also inspired me to write more.'

Mohammed Asaduzzaman

'I was born and brought up in Bangladesh. Since coming here I have been involved in community issues and particularly in recent times the Turner Neighbourhood Renewal. In 2003-04 I took part in the 'Your Voice' research. I am a member of the Independent Advisory Group for Sussex Police. This book is for this generation and generations to come. I am very proud to be part of it.'

Hazera Hoque

'I was born and brought up in Bangladesh. I am married and have three children. I have been living in Brighton for nineteen years. I got involved in this book because I think it will give the whole community a feeling of pride. I hope it will help the young generation to be proud of their identity.'

The Steering Group would like to acknowledge the help and guidance they received from Adult Skills and Learning - Brighton and Hove Council, the Service for English as

an Additional Language (Brighton and Hove LEA), and The Royal Pavilion, Libraries and Museums (Brighton and Hove).

Kate Richardson at The Royal Pavilion, Libraries and Museums (Brighton and Hove), provided training and assistance to the group in the process of collecting and creating an archive of the original materials that have contributed to this book. This archive is accessible via the Brighton History Centre, Brighton Museum and Art Gallery.

Bangla Brighton

New Soil, New Roots

Motherland

I am a country rose
That lives in foreign land
My heart is filled with
The fragrance of my country
The memories of my country
Burn inside my heart
All twelve month

We want the life of our country
In a foreign soil
But when we get the opportunity
Still we are not satisfied in foreign soil
Our mind flies away
Towards a far away land

We want our language
To be the language of our child
We want the breeze of our country
To blow through our child's mind
Alas! When that child grows up
He speaks different language

Everyone's heart is filled
With the memories of
Where they were born
Every heart carries the
Fragrance of that country
Memories that stay in the soul forever

Arriving

I came first in July, in summer time, but it was English weather and I thought 'is this country dark or are my eyes getting fuzzy?'

I came here in 1982 with my parents. Some of my brothers and sisters were born and grew up here; most of my family is here. Our family opened a business and moved from one town to another.

The majority of Bangladeshis came for money, that and education. They started to arrive in Britain in the 1930's. They were young at that time. They were shepherds. They came to look for work and to stay in Britain. During the Second World War they worked in textile factories. It was at that time that the British government sent them working vouchers to come to England.

They used to think that it was not the right thing to bring the family. My father used to think that. After living here about ten, fifteen years and, seeing a lot of people bringing their families, he decided to bring his family.'

When the men came, they used to marry English women. They'd have a wife and children in Bengal and a wife here. There was a Bangladeshi who came to live in Brighton. He used to have a restaurant. He came in the 1930's I think. He married an Irish lady; they always used to marry Irish ladies. Irish ladies were more obedient to their husbands. He had seven children and then, after I think fifteen or sixteen years, his wife died. He went to Bangladesh, he was fifty years or sixty years old then, and married a sixteen-year-old girl.

Broken links

My husband came to England in 1963 and the children and I joined him in 1982. I felt very sad when I came here, as I had left my mother, my father and other relatives behind. England was very cold but I was struck by how clean and nice the houses were.

We gradually settled into our new environment and as the days turned to years it was nice to watch our children grow up and progress from school to college and then into jobs. My daughters got married first and were followed by my sons. I am now a very happy and busy grandmother.

When I first came to England there weren't any telephones in Bangladesh, so I wasn't able to speak to my family and friends - I could only write. Now I have the privilege of access to phones and the internet and can talk with my family whenever I like. My greatest regret is that I didn't have that access when my parents were still alive - I was never able to talk to them on the phone.

Being alone

My husband wanted to go back very much, but after the war started with Pakistan things were insecure. I cried so much. I was alone here - because of knowing nobody and because of the language.

For forty years our father and mother couldn't speak proper English and that was the problem, not going out and not meeting people. They were shut in the house all the time. That's the one big thing that people miss about Bangladesh when they're in England. In Bangladesh your doors and windows are open all the time; you know the whole area - you know everybody, but here sometimes you don't even know your next-door neighbour.

I think Bangladeshi women don't really have a chance to go out and socialise, to go out to cinemas and theatres and things. So whenever they get the free time they take the children to the beach; that's one thing, one place they can go.

London on sea

We still like Brighton better than other towns. It's very nice, it's quiet, easy to live in and friendly. It's very different to London. London is so busy.

Brighton is more multi-cultural nowadays. People are friendlier than before. There is less racism. When I first came there was a lot of racism. Now there are lots of Bengali classes - English classes - English as a second language - there wasn't then and no interpreting service.

I came to Britain in 1973. I was only eighteen years old and there weren't many Bengalis - just three or four families used to live here. I used to miss my family in Bangladesh but I wanted to know about the people, culture and society and everything. My husband used to have some English friends and I used to go their houses. I think it is more modern now and everything has changed - like a rich city. I didn't see racism before. Because we didn't mix with the culture, your culture and that's why we didn't know how you were; how English people are unlike me. I was only eighteen years old and I had a baby and some of the English families used to come and teach me and show me how to do things and they wanted to learn from me how to cook - but I think maybe we didn't know each other very well and that's why there were misunderstandings.

Two years ago I went to Preston and I saw the town and my son was with me and I said 'Look at this the town, it reminds me of old Brighton', old Brighton because I found that some of the places are exactly the same as Brighton used to be. Brighton is very modern now.

Bangladeshi settlers

In the early part of the 20th century there were only a few hundred Bangladeshi settlers in Britain, but throughout the 20's, 30's and 40's, Bangladeshis started to come

here, living mostly in boarding houses that were scattered around the ports of call for the shipping lines - London, Liverpool, Cardiff, Portsmouth.

Today in Britain, there are over 250,000 Bangladeshi settlers from Bangladesh alone. In addition there are at least another sixty-seventy thousand - those that came from the Indian state of West Bengal. There are now 35,000 who live in East London, the greatest number of Bangladeshis settling in Tower Hamlets where they constitute the largest single group amongst the ethnic and Black communities and represent nearly sixty per cent of non-European residents.

For some Britain has become their second home, whilst for many others it is the only home they will ever know.

Most of the men came by sea as ship's crew. In those days it would take three or four weeks to travel by passenger boat, a long journey to an alien country with an uninviting climate. Now of course, Dhaka to London, airport to airport, takes barely nine and a half hours. This country offered the Bangladeshis the opportunity to escape from the poverty of their own country, which was then a British Colony - the Golden Bengal of Tagore.

Bengalis worldwide constitute the sixth largest linguistic group in the world with nearly 180 million voices pledging loyalty to one language and one culture, though they differ in religious faith and are separated by political boundaries.

Brighton village

I like Brighton because it is like where I was born. I was born in a village. The village is linked to the river, to the trees and to green, natural things. My wife, my father, my family all came from a village. We didn't forget the village or the countryside. I found Brighton a little bit like my village – I've been to Newcastle, Darlington, Bishop Auckland – to Cambridgeshire, Devon, Brick Lane, North London, Southgate and Turnpike Lane. I have visited many, many areas, many places – but finally Brighton gave me a little bit of my village life. In this sense it is my village.

There have been changes. Bangladeshi life is faster than in England now. Society in some areas of Bangladeshi the girls are freer than in England now.

When they come over in England they say 'This is England?' and I 'Yes, why?' and they say 'I feel I am in some corner in a village in Bangladesh'. I say 'this is a village. In England we are living as part of village. You've got to appreciate it'.

Why I don't go back to my Bengal homeland?

I have come a long way and a foreign land has become my country. The memories of days in my homeland make me cry. When I came to this country, I always dreamt of going back. That was several decades ago and I'm still dreaming, but now my dream has turned grey. Do people understand that the path of life is a mirage?

When I first arrived here I found everything unpleasant. I cried every day. I can't explain the meaning of those tears. I still cry. I don't know why. I only feel a great emptiness in my chest. I look back at my short life. Today I live in a foreign land, this country is now my country. Still my soul lives in an unsatisfied world, missing the star-filled night sky of my homeland and those who were close to me. I feel that I have achieved nothing.

Life and expectations don't always match. Expectations are limitless and against this infinity of expectations I feel that nothing has been achieved. We are always thinking about what we can't get. Still we must keep positive if we lose that feeling we lose hope. Now in the twilight of my life I believe being positive is God's will.

Sometimes, even now, I think of going back to Bangladesh, but to where and to whom would I return? Nobody would be there as they were before. Everything changes with time: the world changes, people change. After staying for such a long time in this country, sometimes I can't adjust when I go back.

And me, am I still the same? It's painful confronting the environment and situation of my country. Sometimes I think what barrier is there that prevents me from returning to Bangladesh? How can I be satisfied? People who think like this are always in pain. The world is always changing and nobody has any time. Everyone is busy with his or her own lives. This is life; to be always wandering round hoping to fill the cup of happiness.

The view from the Thistle

Since 1983 I have been living in Hove. I had no choice but to come and settle in England, leaving my mother, father, brother and sisters in Bangladesh. I came here to study because higher education in England is of a much better standard than in Bangladesh and I was lucky enough to have an uncle who could sponsor me to come here.

At first I felt very homesick and didn't know how long I would be able to live here without my family. Who could have guessed that I would end up getting married and settling down here forever?

Nowadays I am a supervisor in the Brighton Thistle Hotel where I have been working for fourteen years. Over those years I have seen a lot of famous people as well as holiday makers. I have seen political figures, such as Neil Kinnock, John Smith and Tony Blair, sports legends, like the South African and Indian cricket teams, Steffi Graf and many others. The wedding of Chris Eubank was held in the hotel and the boxing promoter Don King and lots of American boxers were also there. I have seen many pop stars, movie stars and TV soap stars.

Working life has its ups and downs just like the British weather. The view of the seafront with all the holiday makers looks amazing. Unfortunately, it gets so busy in the hotel that we can't enjoy our city's popularity and activities as much as others can.

I really like living in Hove and feel that it is my home. Bringing up children here I sometimes wonder if they will lose their culture and not know what is expected of them as Bangladeshi or as Muslim people. We are lucky to have a lot of relatives in this country and a lot of them in this town and regular visits to family members and celebrating festivals with our own community helps keep the culture alive.

The Bangladeshi community living in Brighton and Hove are mostly based in the food industry. This is their main source of income. There are over forty restaurants and take-aways run by Bangladeshi people here. The long working hours for men working in restaurants means that they don't have much time for a social life. When I first came here, sometimes, during summer time, the Bengali community would get together and arrange five-a-side football tournaments at the King Alfred Leisure Centre. It was very popular amongst the boys and men.

My favourite sport is cricket. I used to play it in Bangladesh and I am still a big supporter of the Bangladeshi and England teams. It is a great feeling to see that Bangladesh is now the tenth test nation in the world. Last summer the Bangladesh 'A' team came to Hove to play a series with the England 'A' team. It was a pleasure to go and witness the event. I also went with my friends and family members to Southampton last year to watch the match between Bangladesh and the West Indies. It was an incredible feeling to watch the young Bangladeshi boys playing in England against other test nations. It was a dream for us.

My favourite pastime in this seaside city is fishing. We go by boat from the marina and we catch mostly Mackerel and Sea Bass. The fish are greatly appreciated at family barbeques in the summer.

All in all, living in Brighton is wonderful and I wouldn't move from here for anything in the world.

'I think it's changing. The old English people, the old British people were different. Their attitude was different. Now those days have gone because we all believe in modernisation, but still we cannot forget old traditions. In the old tradition there was history, in the old tradition there was respect, but modern society brings a Brighton that is now becoming artificial. If you look in the Lanes, the small shops, they were the authentic Brighton. Now we are building big, big supermarkets we are losing Brighton's authenticity.

This Strange Land – land of our father

Bangladesh and me

I'm one of the many young British Asians. I was born and raised in Brighton but my parents both came from Bangladesh.

I have only been to Bangladesh once. My upbringing followed the Bangladeshi traditions and customs. However, I have lots of friends who are British but who don't have an Asian background.

In Bangladesh I have some family who I don't really know and others which I can vaguely remember. I'm curious about my cousins who I saw nine years ago and I would like to meet them again.

Life in Bangladesh is very different to life in Britain. Most of the people in Bangladesh are very like-minded. The majority of Bangladeshi's are Muslim and so am I. However, everyone in Britain is different to each other. Britain is full of diversity, whether it is in religion or culture. Everyone in Britain has their own identity and free will to have individual opinions on anything from football to how the government is run.

I have very strong memories of Bangladesh but I didn't really get a chance to explore and tour the whole country. Although I like the sun and the summertime, I prefer the weather in Britain because in Bangladesh it's just too hot!

Bangladesh is sometimes hit by heavy floods. These can be very dangerous and destructive and may get worse with climate changes and global warming.

Bangladesh has far more poverty and suffering than Britain. The country is not very economically developed. There is a lot of fighting within and between political groups and Bangladeshi civilians are often victims of political strife.

Like the economy and politics, education in Bangladesh needs to advance and develop. In Bangladesh people have to pay for their education and I feel privileged and grateful that I have easy access to advanced and modern education. Compared to Britain, Bangladesh has fewer jobs with good salaries; getting a good job is extremely hard. It is very competitive. That is why living standards are far lower than those in Britain.

Although some of my family live in Bangladesh and my roots are from there, I prefer Britain. I love life in Britain because I have lots of family, friends and relatives here. I really like the mix of people and the multi-cultural and multi-faith society of Britain. My friends, school, likes and dislikes are very like those of any other teenager in Britain, but I value my religion and culture too.

My life as a British Asian has been great and people are very tolerant. However, sometimes I feel very disheartened by the racist or prejudice attitudes of some people. But aside from that, I love being British!

Although I'm very interested in meeting my family in Bangladesh, I can say I prefer living as a Brit here in Britain. But my Bangladeshi culture is something that enhances my character and contributes to the diversity of Britain.

At first when my mum said we were going to Bangladesh, I felt sad; mainly because my dad and older sister weren't going. But on the day, as soon as we got to the airport and I saw all the aeroplanes, I got very excited. The journey was very boring. Bangladesh is a long way away. When we got to Bangladesh, I looked out of the window and everything looked very different. On the way to my granddad's house, I was really amazed by the things I saw. There were cows on the road and funny taxis

that are called rickshaws for people to travel in. The shops and houses looked very different from the shops and houses in England.

In Bangladesh it is very noisy all the time. When you go out you can hear the horns on the cars going beep beep all day. I think it's to keep the cows away from the road. You can also hear the men who bring baskets full of vegetables or fish calling people to buy things from them. My mum and nana bought fish and vegetables from the men every day. I loved carrying the fish into the kitchen.

We mostly stayed at my nana's house. It was a big house with lots of big rooms. The house was very different from the houses in England. There were no carpets on the floor and all the doors and windows were made of wood. There was a water pump at one side of the house and the helpers who work in the house took water from it for us to drink and have a wash. I always used to go to the water pump and try to pump water out, but it was really hard.

I met a lot of my mum and dad's family there. People would come every day to see us and I made friends with one of my cousins. His name was Nahiyen. Whenever my granddad came, he brought me bags full of sweets, crisps and fruit, and whenever my grandma came she brought us lots of curry and other food that we can't get in England. At first I used to talk in English with everyone but then I realised that people couldn't understand what I was saying. It's a good thing that I can speak really good Bengali so afterwards I spoke to everyone in their own language. But I could still speak in English with my mum, aunt and my mum's cousins who are twins who speak and understand English.

Mostly I loved being able to stay outside all the time and play. There was a big space outside nana's house for us to play. There was one thing I didn't like in Bangladesh; the electricity went out once or twice every day. It was scary when it happened at night. My sister and I stayed close to mum when it happened.

I really enjoyed going out with my mum because that's when I got to ride in a rickshaw. You have to hold on tight because the roads are bumpy and you could fall out. I saw one rickshaw carrying four grown men!

Lunch and dinner times were fun because everyone sat to eat together, and the table was always full of lots of different food. That might have been because there were lots of people helping with the cooking. I tried a lot of different spicy food there that I never eat here in England and I liked it.

After a while, it was time to come back to England. I was looking forward to seeing my dad and sister and to playing with my toys again but I was sad to leave everyone I had met in Bangladesh. I had a fantastic time in Bangladesh and would really like to go there again.

'When we got to Bangladesh it was really, really hot. I had never felt so hot before.'

The thing I like about Bangladesh is we don't have to do any work and we can wake up and sleep any time we want. I also like going out. In Brighton I don't have as much fun as I do in Bangladesh with my cousins and family.

The things I don't like in Bangladesh: the mosquitoes, the food, the water, the toilets and it is so boiling hot.

I remember seeing my relatives. At first I didn't recognise everyone, only the family that I had seen on videos and photographs. It felt weird because I didn't know them; I had only seen pictures of them.

One of the things I didn't like about Bangladesh was mosquitoes. They're everywhere and it's really uncomfortable. On top of that it was really hot. This is why I would prefer to live in England and also because this is where I was brought up. However, I would like to go to Bangladesh for holidays and to meet the rest of my family.

I remember when I went to Dhaka, I thought that was the best time in Bangladesh because there was less power cuts, less hot and it felt like I was living in Brighton, I also liked the zoo and the fun fair because at the zoo there were all sorts of animals that I liked and in the funfair my best ride was the aeroplane, I had to press the button to go higher. I think Dhaka is better than Sylhet as it has better facilities.

Although Dhaka is interesting I still prefer living in Brighton, because my family, my cousins and my best friend live in Brighton and also like my school because my teachers are nice and I have friend there too.

Going fishing was the best time I had in Bangladesh. We went into the cold water with a big fishing rod. When I went in the water with my brother and my cousin we started splashing about and ducking our heads under the water. My uncle was the best at fishing because he caught really big fishes and I only caught one fish. At first it was scary holding the fish but then I felt confident.

The most fascinating time was when my uncle took me and my brother to see the horses, the second time, I just went with my brother and we had a great time riding the horses. I prefer living in Brighton though I wish there was horse riding near my house.

My cousin took me and my brother on a rickshaw, we sat on it pretended to ride it. I really want rickshaws here in Brighton, because it's great fun.

The second time I went to Bangladesh I was 6 years old, I remember getting off the plane, it was really, really hot. I felt like coming back to England.

We went to Bangladesh for my auntie's wedding. My aunty came from England with us. When we arrived at my grandmother's house, everything was dark we couldn't see anyone. I asked my uncle what was wrong and he said that the whole city's electricity had gone. After a while it came back. My uncle said that it happens every

day. We had a really nice time at my auntie's wedding, it was different to the weddings in England.

Once we arrived at the Bangladesh airport it was really busy, my dad went to look for my uncle and when he found him we went in a car. I found it really interesting looking at things like people on rickshaws and baby taxis.

When I was at my uncle's house my cousins took me to their school. It was called The Blue Bird High School. We had to wake up really early in the morning at 4 o'clock. When I was there it was sports day that day so I got to see lots of fascinating stuff. After the show had finished I went to one of my cousin's classes, when they opened the windows I saw lots of mosquitoes. The chairs and tables were different than here in Brighton.

After I went back I was really tired and hot. In Brighton it isn't that hot so I prefer living in Brighton.

Once me and two of my cousins decided to have a picnic outside and cook our own rice and curry. It was fabulous cooking with my cousins.

The one problem we had in Bangladesh was the current used to be cut off, so we had to have candles in our hands. I prefer living in England but I think Bangladesh is more interesting as it has many things we can do.

I want to live in Bangladesh with my family because it's nice and fun, I like to go in the shopping mall with my parents, I find shopping interesting because there's lots of things to see and buy, and I love Selwa Kamiz.

Islam

How shall I overcome this shame?

Do not harm my soul
O God
There were mistakes
I know you know all

Still I hope
As I walk ahead
I will find you

Sometimes I stop on my journey
And think
If you come along
and stand by me

How will I overcome?
My shame

I know today that
You know all about me

Islam

Islam is the Muslim religion and the majority of Bangladeshis are Muslims.

The founder of Islam was Muhammad (PBUH).

Muslims believe that there is no God but Allah.

We also believe that Islam is a way of life.

Allah sent the Qu'ran to Muhammad (PBUH). It states the guidelines of Islam.

There are five pillars of Islam:

1. AS-Salah: Muslims have been commanded by Allah to carry out specific prayers, five times a day. From the age of 10 As-Salah (prayer) is compulsory for all Muslims.

2. Shahadah: This is a declaration stating that there are none worthy of worship but Allah and Muhammad (PBUH) is Allah's messenger. This is the testimony of our faith.

3. Zakaat: This is the giving of charity to the poor. It is compulsory for every Muslim who is capable to give a small percentage of their wealth in charity, each Islamic year.

4. Saum-Fasting: Ramadan is the 9th month of the Islamic calendar. It is compulsory for Muslims to abstain from food and drink from early dawn till sun-set throughout the whole month.

5. Hajj: Every Muslim is expected to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. This pilgrimage is called Hajj and is performed on the day of Eid-ul-Azhar.

Muslims believe that Islam is the perfect way of life and that those who follow Islam and believe in Allah will be rewarded with an after-life in heaven.

Ramadan

Muslims all over the world take part in the fast of Ramadan. This fast lasts for a month. Fasting helps Muslims to remember poor people who are hungry. Children who are too young to fast for a month are allowed to join in for two days. Fasting also helps people to obey god - Allah.

During Ramadan a meal is eaten before dawn and after the meal, the family say special dawn prayers called 'fajr'. Then they fast all day. They do not eat or drink again until it gets dark. When the family has completed the fast they feel relieved and thoughtful. In this way we can all feel equal to each other and remember that we should all be grateful for what we have.

Eid-ul-Fitr

On the last evening of Ramadan, Muslims wait for the new moon to appear. When the new moon comes out Eid-ul-fitr has begun. Everybody rushes to hug each other and

say 'Eid Mubarak!' (Eid blessings). At Eid-ul-fitr, people give Eid cards and presents are given to the children and family.

During this special occasion lots of different kinds of delicious food are made.

There is a special prayer meeting at the Mosque and everybody prays. They remember poor people and give money to charity. Later, families sometimes visit relative's graves. Eid-ul-fitr is a happy day to remember loved ones.

Qurbani Eid

Qurbani Eid is another festival that is held 2 months after Eid-ul-fitr. During this festival cows and sheep are slaughtered and shared between the family and the poor. One portion of the meat is kept for family and friends and the rest goes to the poor.

It is at this time that Muslims from all around the world go on the pilgrimage to Mecca called Hajj.

Religion is not harming anyone. But because of it people are targeting us - because we are Muslim. They think that there is something wrong with us, that we are the guilty ones.

Some people have been attacked, not in Brighton, but in London - because they are wearing the Hijab and covering up.'

Islam is a very peace loving religion. These are extremists. You can't judge everyone by extremists and I don't know why they judge other people.

At the mosques in Brighton they teach Arabic to our children and because of the clothes they are wearing and the hats and the long beards, because they look like that, the police stop them in the road and search them and ask them questions and they feel really hurt.

Religion and learning

The teacher comes once a week to teach the children at home. Because religion is a very important part of our life.

The next generation will live as Bengali and Muslim, but not as it used to be, not as it is now. It is going to be much lighter. I remember when we were young my father said, 'You are not very religious. You are not going to be as religious as me. You are not going to be as religious as people nowadays.' Compared to them we are much lighter - and our children are going to be much lighter than us, but their understanding and their culture, religion and everything will be better than ours. We read the Koran in Arabic in our country when we are little - we didn't understand the meaning and we couldn't write - we could only read. But our children, they don't want to learn like this. They want to learn and know - what does this mean? They want to understand. They want to learn about what they have been given - they want to know the meaning.

I read the Koran in Arabic - I had to learn Arabic - I had to read the Koran. But now when I read in Arabic I cannot satisfy myself - I have to have the translation. I said 'What shall I learn from the Arabic if I don't know the meaning'. It says you will do this... the rule of life is like this. There are so many rules and regulations, but if I don't know the meaning, what is their use? I think that without meaning I cannot do it. We don't understand what we are reading. We want to learn the meaning.

Now our children just want to understand, to learn and understand. They learn it in English - because their reading and writing skills are English now.

Being a Muslim, it is my duty to teach my children about Islam. The Muslim religion requires people to believe in Allah and to learn how to read the Holy Qu'ran. The five pillars of Islam are the declaration of faith, the performance of Salah, the fast during the month of Ramadan, the paying of Zakat and the performance of Hajj once in a lifetime.

Muslim women and girls dress in an Islamic way. Their whole body except for the face and hands are covered. My daughters have started covering their hair with a headscarf when they go out in public. I think getting them started from an early age gets them used to it. They go to the Mosque twice a week and once a week the Imam comes to the house to teach them Arabic. The girls know that this is part of their life and are happy to fulfil their duties.

We are very pleased that in this city there are so many facilities and that we can educate our children about their religion. Altogether there are three Mosques in Brighton and Hove and, on the festival of Eid, Hove Town Hall and Portslade Town Hall are used as venues for special prayers.

Going to the Mosque lets parents and children mix with all the Bangladeshi community. Bengali families send their children to the Mosque to learn Arabic to enable them to read the Qu'ran and learn all the duties that are expected of a Muslim.

A miraculous encounter at Hajj

After thirty-six long years of stressful living we dreamt of more peaceful times and, in 1998, the time came to give up our family business.

For a long time we had hoped to do Hajj and this was the first step. Every Muslim, if they are in good health and can afford it, should do Hajj at least once in their lifetime - now it was our turn.

The next pilgrimage was to start at the end of March and we began to prepare for our journey. It would be a four-week trip, the first three weeks spent in Mecca for the main Hajj and the last in Medina. We were filled with fear and excitement, delighted by the thought of exploration and nervous about whether or not we would be able to complete the journey. After preparing our children for our long absence from home we bade farewell to our friends, family and neighbours.

We left on March 6th flying by Saudi Airlines from Heathrow Airport to Jeddah - a six hour journey. After we had arrived and gone through customs we set off by bus for Mecca. We got there at four in the morning and were met at the bus station by a guide who was there to prepare us for the first stages of the pilgrimage. He took us to the hotel and gave us identity cards and wristbands in case we got lost, or met with an accident.

On the first day in Mecca we prayed in the Masjid al Haram and circled the Kabbah house. On first seeing the mosque I found it so beautiful I couldn't take my eyes off it. Hajj takes only five days in Mecca - the main purpose of Hajj is for a Muslim to prove their dedication to Allah through mind, body and soul.

Mecca is a place for all Muslims from around the world to join together no matter what race, class or ethnicity. From Kings to the helpless, Hajj is a place of equality. Everyone is linked by one faith, everyone has the same rules and everyone has the same purpose; saving their souls from sin through the fear of Allah and respecting the ways of Allah by improving their spiritual and mental well-being.

After completing Hajj, we left Mecca and set off for Medina where the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) was laid to rest. In Medina's green and tranquil surroundings I felt calm and although there were thousands of pilgrims it was not at all chaotic. Everyone was at peace with each other and everyone was willing to help each other. The people of Medina are themselves very calm and quiet and in this peaceful environment a week passed without my hardly noticing. I couldn't bear the thought of leaving, yet I had to gather all my things and in the evening we set off to the Masjid for the last time to complete our prayers to Allah.

We would always leave for the mosque together and amongst all the people we would return back without frantically searching for one another.

One day, when I was coming back by myself, I saw a face I recognised. Surely it couldn't be. The face I remembered was the face of a child from a photograph—the son of my close friend who died some years ago and yet I found myself looking at the face of a grown man and I knew him. I stood there wondering whether it was really him. I plucked up my courage and asked him if he was a Bengali and from Bangladesh, he replied 'Yes' to both. I asked him if his name was 'Shishu' and he laughed and said, 'You know my name as well?' I surprised him further by asking his mother and father's names. I introduced myself and became acquainted with my dear friend's son Shishu. We were due to leave the next day and we didn't have much time - Shishu's driver had already arrived to pick him up, but he told the driver to return later and he came with me to meet my husband and the rest of our group who also knew his parents. After sitting and talking with us for an hour, it was time for him to leave. He said it was sad that he had only met us now when everything was over and people were on their way and he said that he wished that he could have got to know us better.

The next morning at 8 o'clock we left for the airport. We had completed such a great pilgrimage and my mind was at rest. Millions of people at the same time, with the same purpose and the same clothing and taking the same route merged and flowed

together like water in a river, and amongst those thousands I don't know how I came to meet Shishu. I had only ever seen one photograph of him when he was young, and the fact that I remembered him surprised me. It was like a miracle from Allah and it brought tears to my eyes.

Prayer

My husband can pray with me and I can pray with him or with my children - but men have to be in front, but not as leaders, and we have to pray a little bit back. It is different to other religions. The reason is this; if your husband is praying next to you, you might attract his attention. We have to pray just for God - with nothing around. We have to connect with God and leave everything behind.

Praying in a room you live in, you can't, for obvious reasons, pray in front of photographs -like idols. So we cover them - because we are talking to Allah.

Prayer, I think, is a gift of God. It is just like a meditation. You are just talking to your Lord, your God. You can say everything: good, bad, if I want anything, if we've got problems, just talking with him and telling him.

Children are lazy about prayer - like we used to be, like I used to be when I was young. They will be like us when they've matured. Inshallah.

Other religions

When I was first in England a Jehovah's Witness came to my door. She gave me a Bengali translation of the Bible. I read it. I found it very nice, the way it is written. It is very nice. Actually every religion says good things. I respect all of them.

Our religion says: respect all the religions. You cannot criticise religion. In the five pillars of our religion- the first is faith. It says there is one god and the Prophet Mohammed is the messenger of God and we have to have faith in our religion. One Allah and his messenger is Mohammed - Mohammed is the messenger of God. It also teaches us about other faiths. We have to believe that Allah sent us the religious books: the Koran, the Torah and the Bible. Jesus is respected as a prophet and Moses is respected as a prophet. We believe all of the three religious books came from God. The Koran has not changed over 1400 years - it's the same as before.

Days I left behind

After walking a long way through the road of life the human mind cries for the lost days. The life spirit becomes unstable. We feel indifferent to what's around us as the memories call us and the desire to go back to the old days takes its grip.

I never thought that I would write about my lost days. My childhood was spent in a village. We were all brothers and sisters. We grew up together. We laughed and cried at times of happiness and grief. That life was like another world. There was no responsibility. There was no need to spend valuable time trying to make others happy. Life was filled with the affection of our parents.

But I was growing up, I had to study to prepare myself for life. I went to the village school with my brothers and sisters and friends from the village. There were paddy fields on both sides of the road to school. The rice stalks saluted us with the rhythm of the breeze. The streets of the village were filled with the hum of laughter and songs.

I remember the day when Pakistan became an independent state and part of the world family of countries. There was great happiness among all the teachers and students. Independence Day was celebrated. I was very little at that time and too young to understand the significance of it all. Still I can remember the Pakistani flag flying in the wind and how delighted we all were. We did not realise that pride in that flag would only belong to the people of today's Pakistan and that the Bengalis would lead a captive life under it. That is why Bangladesh was created and that is why we carry the memories of two states inside one mind.

Although there were rules and regulations in our family life, life was full of freedom. After returning from school we had a light meal and did our homework. Then we went to play in the field. We played and wandered around however we pleased. When I think back to these happy days, I really want to be reborn as a small child. Just after the light of the day was gone the silence of night would descend on our village and the houses would be filled with the light of oil lamps. We would all go to the study room together to complete the day's study with the assistance of our private tutor. The next day we had to get ready for school again.

Days passed slowly. Then childhood days were over. There was no high school for girls in the village, so I had to go to town to attend school. I started to study at a boarding school. The memories of hostel life are the best of my life. Those days still bring colourful pictures to my mind. I can still see myself as the girl who was punished by the teachers for having a constant grin on her face. It also happened in the village school. But for me at that age it was natural to smile all the time.

Hostel life was bound by strict rules. We had to have a bath and start our studies just after the bell rang. We had to take our books and stand in line ready for school at ten in the morning. After returning from school we had our evening meal and went to the playground, where we would talk cheerfully with our friends and play different kinds of games. These memories take me deep and don't want to come back from there. After evening prayers we had to gather in the study room. First we would recite a little from the Holy Qu'ran and then we would study till ten p.m.

During the school holidays, we went back to the village and life was again filled with the love and affection of our near and dear ones. I still remember my respected youngest uncle. Whenever I looked up at him he told me to smile and said that he liked to see my smiling face. This was the only place where I had no need to worry about getting too excited. I still can hear his affectionate voice in my mind. Its melody still gives me pleasure. I still long for that loving touch. There was also my aunt. She was childless. She took all our brothers and sisters as her own and her love still touches my heart. She hugged us whenever she saw our pale faces and all sadness was washed away with her loving touch. When my parents punished me, I got comfort from her. The touch of love is easy to recognise, a good feeling moves down

the body. They were not complicated people and their love was simple. So my heart cries when I see the foreign life of my children. Although they get parental guidance, they don't have anyone to comfort them. Life becomes fulfilled with the caring touch and it helps to keep a good relationship with parents.

The deepest tragedy of my life is that I wasn't there when Amma (my mother) passed away. She asked to see me repeatedly but left this world without seeing me. Where shall I hide this tragedy? Those who are childless always try to survive with the love of someone else. I loved Amma very much. When I think about this, I feel that life, the world and everything is a lie. I realise that the whole of life is a spiritual playground and that we feel, after going through all this, that life is a failure.

Soon teenage beckoning me. I answered that call forgetting all other things. I felt new happiness in my soul; it was the time for daydreams. People see colourful daydreams at that age. They create castles of fantasy. Some people find those dreams come true and some don't. Still those accumulated imaginings are very sweet. It gives pleasure at leisure times to remember and play with those imaginings. After that, the sport of spirituality starts. This bond is very critical. The ship of life sails to find land. Some make it to shore and some don't, because the calculations of human life don't always bring the expected results. In the debit and credit book of life some find a balance and others find enormous debt. This is the way of life and it comes to an end in due time and again the sky and air is refreshed with the humming sound of a new generation.

The little girl and the discovery of science

Today while teaching my granddaughter the alphabet I started to reminisce about my first day of schooling at home and all the feelings and memories just rushed back.

I remember evenings as being our family time. My parents and ourselves sharing our day's adventures with each other. My father and mother would tell us memories, stories and songs from when they were young and whilst still teaching us in between. We would quiz them about each and every thing that they said. Fridays, my father's day off, were our favourite days and we would have a whole day of him spending time with us. Sometimes we would even go out for the day.

My first day of schooling was a Friday too, like every other week my father returned home after finishing his Jumrah prayers. This particular Friday he brought with him a white bag. After lunch he passed me the bag saying 'A present for you!'

Delighted, I hurried through the contents of the bag. In it was a little red frock, a clay writing board with a box of clay pencils and some jilabbi sweets wrapped in newspaper. Father dressed me in the red frock himself. He held me in his arms and placed me on his lap. He held his hand over mine and began with 'Bismillah'.

On the fresh clay board we started writing my first alphabet. I repeated the alphabet over his writing a few more times on my own with clay pencils.

“Well done! Very good! If you do this daily you'll learn it in no time at all” he said.
“Now pass everyone some sweets.”

Happily I handed everyone a piece of jilabbi. Every morning and evening after that I would practice my alphabet with my father and even, sometimes, with my mother. It was not long afterwards that I was reading, writing and counting quite quickly.

Near the age of five I was admitted to our local primary school. For the first few weeks my father would take me and pick me up. Then I started to go on my own with the neighbouring children. It didn't take long for me to ease into the school environment. I did my best to stay in the teacher's good books. I used to enjoy it when he told tales and stories.

One rainy afternoon he suggested a different task and asked us general knowledge questions. I remember one of them vividly.

“If you see two cows with both your eyes, how many would you see with only one eye?”

Most of the children quickly replied: “ONE cow!”

Intrigued, I thought for a second, squinted with one eye and then raised my arm up high.

“We would still see two!” I said triumphantly.

My teacher smiled and asked me how I came to this answer. I explained my theory and from that day on I became one of his favourite students.

Although I never managed higher education, I believe the fact that I've remembered and written my little story is a great achievement in itself and its roots are in the day when my father helped me write my first alphabet.

Memories and culture

It is a great pleasure to roam through the memories of lost days. Sometimes these jumbled memories can make us happy, other times they can make us emotional, bringing tears to the eyes. These memories are a mixture of joy and sorrow: the happy memories of a relative's wedding for instance but also the sad ones of losing someone very close. The ways of marking these memories can vary at different times or in different countries, the formalities might be different - that is just the culture of the country or nation - but the happiness or grief of remembering are always the same.

I was born in Bangladesh and grew up there. I came to this country sixteen years ago. But still my heart cries from time to time. The memories of near ones touch me. I can remember some sweet and some bad memories.

I was sixteen when my father died. We were living in Dhaka where, as my father was in public service, we had a government apartment. A lot of relatives and neighbours

crowded into our home when they heard the sad news of my father's passing. Everybody was comforting us, the six brothers and sisters. I am the oldest, so everyone was talking to me. The mental condition of my mother was really bad. Everybody, especially my grandmother, aunts and relatives were taking good care of my mother. They prayed for the happiness of my father's soul after the funeral. My father's body was carried to Sylhet from Dhaka to be buried at his country house. After three days, there was a feast for the poor and then there were forty days of mourning, praying and reciting from the Holy Book followed by another big feast for the poor. This kind of formality and emotional expression when someone dies seems different in this country.

In this country, if a neighbour dies you will never know unless you ask or some person who was close to them tells you. If someone dies in hospital, all the formalities are government funded and done directly from there. This would be unthinkable in Bangladesh. This is just only one example of the difference of expression between two countries.

And what about happy occasions? Say for example a wedding ceremony. We went to the wedding ceremony of my younger brother in Bangladesh and we enjoyed ourselves a lot. From two days before the ceremony, the house was decorated with bright neon lights. The bridegroom hands were covered with Mehendi the night before the wedding. The whole house was filled with loud music. Gifts, ornaments, saree etc ... were sent to the bride's house the night before the wedding. Relatives were gathered in the house on the night before the wedding. The Bridegroom was taken to the Bride's house with a large fleet of cars containing the wedding guests. There was a welcoming ceremony for the Bridegroom at the beginning and after the religious formalities and blessings, the newly wedded couple were introduced to the wedding guests. We were entertained and there was a huge amount of food of different and delicious varieties. The wedding ceremony lasted for three days. On the third day the bridegroom has to throw a party. About five hundred guests came to my younger brother's wedding and I introduced myself to all of them. It was a wonderful experience. Ceremonies take place in this country also and these are expressions of emotions too. But they are different.

Among other festivals in Bangladesh Eid ul Fitre and Eid ul Azha are the main. Bangladesh turns to celebration mood in these two Eids. When Christmas comes to England, it reminds me Eid in Bangladesh. We wear new clothes on Eid day and go to the houses of our relatives and friends. Also on the day of Eid we pay respect to our parents by touching their feet and they give us new banknotes and their love. It is almost the same as the customs of Christmas in England.

I must also mention religious tolerance. As in England, there are Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians living in Bangladesh. They all celebrate their own religious festivals with great joy and there are public holidays on these festival days and there is the same harmony in the celebration of religious festivals in England.

The gentle light and the wind's sweet songs

I came to this country with my loved one three decades ago. I didn't think about what was happening at the time - I didn't think I would forget my past and that I wouldn't know what the future would bring. I took things one day at a time. I had no idea then of settling down in this country, but I did dream of returning to Bangladesh, to my birth place, where I could mix with my home people and spend the rest of my life sharing my times of happiness and sorrow with those that I love the most.

Today I am a Bengali woman living in England. My expedition to a foreign country challenged me with many strange situations that made me feel hopeless and extremely fragile. I constantly questioned my weakness. I felt as though I was obstructed from using my talents. However, my courage and enthusiasm kept me going. I began to see people as my own and I felt that they returned this feeling. But still the memories of my childhood and the family I had left behind continued to hurt.

I cross seven seas to return to my loved ones and although the journey is very long and fatiguing the contentment in my mind keeps me going. I love it when I go to my motherland. And this feeling of love wakes me up. I realise that a lot has changed and I cannot feel the same rhythm as I had before, though the restoring touch of my relatives and the people I am close to fills my heart. I observe the change of the generations, the changes in the country and the changes in people's minds. I cannot bring back the same warm feelings that I once had. This makes me feel nervous. I notice a change in people from when I was last here, and it daunts me a little.

However, the nature of my country keeps me happy. The sky's gentle light and the wind's sweet songs are things I have never witnessed anywhere else. I love talking in my own language in the company of my brothers and sisters and meeting new people every day. It gives me a fond feeling that brings tears to my eyes.

I hate leaving the people that I love and returning to a foreign country. Again and again I wonder why I leave; why I don't stay in my native land. I don't know the answer to this question, but every time I return I feel like a bird that does not know how to fly when it is released from a cage. One part of me wants to stay in the land of my childhood memories and another pulls me towards the love of my children. These feelings keep me in my place and always fill my heart with love.

Bangladesh - land and people

Village and city

Bangladesh is a land of natural beauty dominated by many rivers that meander through a landscape wrapped by flower gardens, orchards and paddy fields.

Bangladesh embraces two contrasting ways of life. Most of the hard-working people of Bangladesh are village dwellers - farming, metalwork, pottery making and weaving are their main occupations. Their way of life is very simple and ordinary. They spend their life in huts made of mud, thatch or tin; poverty deprives them from material luxuries or comforts.

The cities attract ambitious people, as employment, business and trade opportunities are far better than in the villages. But there are no views of green nature and fresh air is not available in cities that are made of brick, stone and wood.

Do people really smile more in Bangladesh?

In Bangladesh in general it looks as if everybody smiles. My husband was working for a German in Bangladesh and he said 'I don't understand - such a poor country - still everybody is laughing, children are laughing, how can this be possible - everybody's laughing. They are so poor, they haven't got anything, but still the children have smiles on their faces'.

Different people have different ways of thinking. I just think that people who are rich get ill and old more quickly than people who are poor. People used to die from disease but, in other ways, their bodies and minds were more healthy, more alive. Because the poor are happy with little things - if they've got meals for two days, morning and evening, and if they've got a roof and if they've got two sets of clothes they are happy. They think 'that's enough for me and if our children can have a little bit of education and if they can survive'. The people who are rich just want more and more and more.

It is true that poor people are satisfied with little things in our country. Less is happier and good. We don't understand that; we just want a little bit more and little bit more and then, at the end, when you've got more - you go crazy.

I think it is the weather. The weather of this country is quite depressing. That's why people cannot smile and it's the reason for this disorder - wanting more things. They want to change things. They feel depressed and they want to do something else so that they can feel happy when they are at home. They want to change things - they want to change furniture, they want colour, they want to paint their rooms in different colours. If they haven't got anything to do, then they're depressed and they want more things. When they are depressed they go shopping and buy so many things to satisfy themselves. But if it is sunny they go out and they don't go shopping, they'll go to the park.

There are good sides and bad sides everywhere. In Bangladesh - when it's sunny and hot - it becomes very hot - people get depressed - people get lethargic and they don't know what to do, they just look for a place where it is cold and where they can be happy. The opposite of what happens here.

Martyrs Day - 21st February

Prior to 1971 Bangladesh was called East Pakistan and was ruled by Pakistan in the west. In 1952 the Pakistani rulers announced that Urdu was to be the state language instead of Bengali.

The people of East Pakistan protested against this announcement. The Bengalis demanded Bengali as the state language and on 21st February, 1952 they

demonstrated in support of this demand. In an effort to stop the procession the Pakistanis opened fire on it and many, like Shafiq, Barkat, Rafiq, Jabbar and Shafiur, were martyred. It is through the loss of the lives of these heroes that we can speak Bengali today.

Martyrs Day is the day when we show respect for these martyrs and it is celebrated on the 21st February every year. Wherever in the world there are Bengalis, the martyrs are remembered and honoured.

Long live the memories of the martyrs.

21st February is coloured red with the blood of my brother,
how can I forget it?

February is made from the tears of many mothers who lost their sons,
how can I forget it?

Independence and Victory Day

The war of liberation began when on the night of 25th March 1971, the Pakistani army started the massacre and torture of Bengalis. Thousands of innocent Bengalis were killed.

Independence Day in Bangladesh is celebrated on 26th of March because it was on this day in 1971 that Major Ziaur Rahman, broadcasting from Chittagong Kalurghat Radio Station, declared independence. What was then East Pakistan changed its name to Bangladesh and cut off all relations with Pakistan. The Bengalis started to fight to free the country from the occupation of the Pakistani army.

The fight for independence lasted about nine months. About three million people were martyred in the war. The Pakistani army entirely destroyed Bangladesh. They only left the land behind. Independence cost three million lives. My grandfather, uncle, cousins and many others were among those martyrs. All the men in my grandfather's house were ordered to stand in a line and were mown down - all of them. Then they set fire to the village. Nothing was left but the land. I remember them today with all the respect that is due to them.

The Bangladeshis were victorious on the 16th December 1971. On that day the occupation forces of Pakistan were finally defeated and they surrendered in Dhaka. Bangladesh was independent and every year on the 16th December we celebrate "Victory Day".

"O my golden Bengal, I love you
your sky, your wind always
plays flute in my soul"

(From the Bangladeshi National Anthem)

A brief guide to Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the oldest human habitations. It dates back 100,000 years. It has an area of 144,000sq. km. and a temperate climate with heavy rainfall during the monsoon. Dhaka the capital city was founded by the Mughals in 1608. It has a population of 9 million. Chittagong and Mongla are its sea ports.

Bangla is the largest delta in the world. The three main rivers The Barmhapura, The Padma and The Megna sweep the country with countless tributaries.

About 80% of the population of Bangladesh is Muslim, 10% is Hindu and the rest is made up of Christians and Buddhists. Bengali is the official language and English is a compulsory second language.

The history of Bangladesh can be divided into four periods: the pre-moghul (Buddhists and Hindus 13th century), the Muslim period of the mogul empire, the British rule and the Pakistan period.

Islam came to Bengal in the thirteenth century. At that time there was an influx of traders, missionaries, fortune seekers and conquerors. Arabs, Turks, Afghans, Persians, Mughals - even Abyssinians came to the country. These distinct new elements in the population resulted in there being a Muslim majority.

Joining Hands - love and marriage

Why there is a tear in the sky and the air

Love is a flower from heaven
It blossoms inside people's hearts
The flower grows in the spirit of the heart
Hiding from every eye
This flower has not blossomed inside everyone's heart
That is why life is full of mistakes

Love is a light
It brightens the world
The insignificant becomes beautiful with its touch
The heart becomes a limitless sea
This light does not appear in everyone's heart
That is why night is covered with darkness

Love is a holy tie
It unifies people's souls
Bringing the taste of freedom
Where the difference between known and unknown is gone
This tie doesn't rest in everyone's heart
That is why there is a tear in the sky and the air

Bangladeshi weddings

Holdi: The Holdi is a small function for the bride to be and a few of her female friends. In this ceremony the women get together and rub a paste made of turmeric powder on to the bride's legs, arms and face, etc. Then the bride has to wash off the paste. Often the women put paste on each other for fun. This function usually takes place a day before or a few days before the wedding itself and is a very traditional feature of Bengali weddings. There is also a Holdi for the groom just like the bride's but with the groom's male friends present.

Mehendi: The Mehendi is a very popular traditional function which is also carried out a few days before the wedding. In the Mehendi a small number of close friends and family are invited with both female and male guests present. Everyone takes turns to give the bride some food - cake or fruit depending upon what's provided. Then the bride changes into a saree specifically for Mehendi which is brought along by some of the groom's representatives. The bride's hands are then decorated with Mehendi, also known as henna. During this function there is a very cheerful atmosphere and the friends and family put a little henna on each other. Sometimes there's also other forms of entertainment e.g. traditional Mehendi folk songs. The function is exactly equivalent for the groom too, but he wears a Punjabi and it is provided by his family. During the function there is also a meal provided from those who attend. The groom's representatives usually bring along some traditional sweets – Mishti to the brides Mehendi function.

Wedding: When the wedding day arrives there's lots of hustle, bustle. The bride wears the clothes, jewellery and make-up provided by the groom's family. The bride's sisters adorn her with the jewellery etc. Then everyone goes down the town hall where the wedding is to take place. The groom, his friends and family come to the town hall in the bride's home town. Before entering the bride's younger brother and sisters demand money or a gift of an equivalent value. Once this is paid the groom and his guests are showered with flower petals and given a small piece of fruit. Once everyone is seated at tables the Nikah (the Islamic marital contract) is read out, along with Kutbah (readings from the Quar'an).

My sister's wedding

A Bangladeshi wedding has three main events. In England these events are stretched over three weekends so that it's easy for everyone to attend. First there is the Henna day, when the bride's hands are covered with beautiful henna decorations. Second there is the Wedding day, arranged and paid for by the bride's parents or older brothers. Finally there comes the Walima, which is hosted by the groom's side of the family.

My sister's wedding took place in August 2000. A Bangladeshi Muslim wedding is loud, colourful, fun-filled and exciting. It is an event that is thoroughly enjoyed by the young and the old and it is full of traditional food and ceremony - enough to satisfy the greediest of appetites and with a guest list of nearly a thousand people, this was building into a truly grand event.

Cards were printed and friends and family were all invited. The venue was the Grand Hall at Hove Town Hall for the wedding. A traditional bridal swing stage was added to make the place complete. But what all the women and girls long for is the henna ceremony that takes place before the wedding. There is music and dance and, in our family, a good old foam, colour and silly string fight!

Our relatives from New York arrived a month before the wedding and everyone got together to help us to make the big day flawless. Every day at my house the girls practiced their dancing for the henna day. The noise they made as they danced to the Indian music was mind blowing. Luckily, I have good neighbours who didn't mind at all.

Being the creative and artistic one of the family, it was my duty to conjure up a stage for the bride to sit on at the henna ceremony. With a nine-month old baby in my arms I knew I had to start well in advance if I was to get it done on time. Who would have guessed, that with a few sheets of polystyrene and coloured tissue paper and just a bit of imagination, I too could build a stage as magnificent as those the professionals make in Bangladesh. I was very pleased with my creation. With everything arranged and everyone prepared, the long-awaited henna day arrived. The bride looked gorgeous, the hall looked amazing and everyone had a great time. The ceremony was well arranged and, on the day, the dancers were fantastic; all their hard work had paid off.

Nervousness increased as the big day got nearer and nearer. The bride, who had met her life partner to be only twice before, was anxious about what life would have in store for her in her new house. Bangladeshi marriages are mostly arranged but a lot of research into the individual and the family background is done. A great deal of thought is given so that the couple can adjust easily to each other and other family members.

With a bright red bridal saree with gold embroidery, head covered with a matching dupatta and smothered with gold jewellery the young bride is ready for her big day. All the female relatives dressed in stunning outfits and their sparkling jewellery make the hall shimmer. Everyone waited eagerly for the groom and his family to arrive. Usually they can have up to a hundred of their guests with them. All of the bride's younger brothers, sisters, cousins and friends wait by the gate guarding the entrance. They pester the groom and he is forbidden to enter until he pays them the money that they demand. Usually the youngsters spend this money on a good day out. Then the time came for the food to be served and everyone enjoyed themselves.

Akth is the most important part of a Muslim wedding, this is when the bride and groom accept the marriage and each other. A traditional ritual of showing the bride's face to the groom is carried out in most weddings. The bride has her head covered and sits bowing down, a mirror is placed on her lap and the groom looks into the mirror to see the bride's face. Then the groom rewards the bride with a beautiful watch or gold jewellery. At the end of the day comes the heartbreaking part when the bride's family have to send her away with her husband. The atmosphere is full of emotions and the bride cries at the thought of having to leave her parents' house and belong

somewhere else. Everyone wishes the newlyweds a long and very happy life together.

Arranged marriages

For Bangladeshis, marriage is thought of as the most beautiful, sacred and special bond that unites two people forever. Every person in their heart knows that they will be married only once in their lifetime. It is believed that before a person comes to the world Allah makes their match so, good or bad, people accept it as their destiny and Allah's wish.

The rules of marriage are that the wife has only eyes for her husband and vice versa. There is no room for unfaithfulness. A wife dresses herself for her husband and the husband adores her alone.

Even though it isn't questioned or tested, virginity of both sexes before marriage is expected. Sex before marriage is forbidden. There is no sex education in schools in Bangladesh. Even the word is too shameful to be spoken. Children are seen as innocent angels who will gain no benefit from knowing about this area. Children see their body change and they accept it. Husband, wife, children and family seem so natural and the children know and understand relationships very well.

Almost all marriages are arranged. This probably doesn't go down too well with Europeans. But it seems to go well with this culture. I guess everything has its good sides and bad sides, but people haven't had the need to find out if there's a bad side. Bangladeshi people believe strongly in compromising. Whether it be for love, money, food or clothes. You don't have to have everything that someone else has to be happy. Instead of looking at someone who is above you in life see those that are below and be thankful that you are so fortunate. A bit of compromise from both parties is a strong base of a good relationship.

Nowadays some people choose their own partners but somehow it still ends up being arranged by the parents because caste, class background and history needs to be checked to see if the couple can adjust to each other's lifestyle. Also there are some cases where those who know their family members or parents won't agree to the marriage and just run away and get secretly married. But they end up losing their family because of the shame and insult they have brought upon them. Parents disown children who are so selfish and disobedient.

Bangladeshi people find marriage out of caste very difficult to accept. Even though some are marrying into other groups of the same religion there are those who still find it hard to digest. This doesn't mean that they think that no one else can measure up to them but more a question of how much you can ask people to adjust to your way of living.

As soon as a daughter starts becoming an adult, the parents are faced with the great responsibility of building their daughter's own life so she will have a safe and happy life with a partner who takes responsibility for her well-being. The proposals of marriage start coming from all directions and after the necessary checks it is left to Allah's wish.

Two of us

His Story

At the beginning of 2003 I came to England to live in Brighton. I was born and brought up in the town of Sylhet in Bangladesh. I come from a relatively small family, I am the eldest son and I have two sisters. My father works as a Co-operative Officer and my mother is a retired Head Teacher. My eldest sister is a doctor and lives in America with her husband, a Computer Engineer. She is the proud mother of twins – a boy and a girl. My youngest sister has also recently qualified as a doctor. She married in 2004 and I was lucky enough to be present at the wedding. Her husband is a doctor too and they live in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is a laid-back country where people have time to share with their friends and family. The thing I miss most about Bangladesh is being close to family and friends - I miss their companionship.

I made lots of friends at school, college and university. We used to make each other laugh and we would hang out at student cafes. We spent a lot of time playing music as part of the college band and had a lot of fun putting our talents together and making the band successful. Nowadays most of my friends are doctors. They have all gone back to their hometowns to start their careers. I also studied for three years at medical school before deciding it wasn't what I wanted to do.

My mother recommended my wife to me. She had met her, liked her and appreciated her ambition to become a teacher.

Her Story

Born in Bangladesh and brought up in Brighton, my experiences of the cultures of Bangladesh and Britain have been varied. My father brought me to England when I was only nine months old. From then on most of my childhood was spent in Brighton and Hove. I attended West Hove Infant and West Hove Junior Schools. I had the best childhood at these schools and I used to love going to school every day. Blatchington Mill School was also a great experience and it is through these schools that I became seriously interested in education and wanted to get as far as possible in it.

At the University of Sussex I had the opportunity to develop in many ways and eventually gained my degree as a Bachelor of Science with Honours.

My family visited Bangladesh on average every five years. The length of our stay there was usually kept short to ensure we did not miss too much school. The exception to this was 1992 when we stayed there for about nine months. My father was planning to build a home in Sylhet where we would be able to live more comfortably than in our village. My sisters and I thoroughly enjoyed our time in Bangladesh as we could spend the whole day playing and exploring an environment that was completely novel and adventurous for us. As we had an extended family

living within the village, there was never a shortage of playmates or ideas for games. Since our stay was longer than normal we also had the chance to get lessons in Bengali and Arabic reading and writing.

Bangladesh is a beautiful lush green and sunny country, where people have time for family and are friendly. We were sad to leave just when we were becoming attached to it. Our next major trip to Bangladesh was in 2002 when I got married there.

The Wedding

The marriage was arranged and we both still remember the butterflies in our stomachs when we first met each other! My husband came with his family to see my family and myself. The celebrations started a week after both sides had agreed to the marriage.

The marriage lasted for three days. The first night and day are usually devoted to applying henna to the bride and bridegroom's hands. Both households were bustling with family, friends and other guests. Our homes were decorated with beautiful lights and colourful ornaments. The henna was applied to my hands by my sister and aunt, who competed over who could produce the most intricate design. Henna was applied to my husband's hands by his two aunts. Family and friends sang most of the night away, sharing the joy of the new union between families. Day two was the actual day of the wedding ceremony, hosted by the bride's family. Day three was the final day of the celebration and was hosted by the bridegroom's family. On both days we had to make sure we looked our best. I wore a beautiful red sari with gold trimmings on the wedding day, and a maroon "Lehenga" on the final day. My husband wore a cream "Sherwani" on the wedding day and a black suit on the final day.

Life Together

I spent about a month in Bangladesh after our wedding. We got to know each other and our families spent a lot of time together too. Then I had to come back to England, as I needed to apply to university to study for my Post Graduate Certificate in Education.

My husband came to England about three months afterwards. He liked England from the beginning; but he did miss his family a lot. During the past two years his English has improved a great deal, which has made it much easier for him to make friends, to work and to adjust to this country. Both of us like the weather in England, as it is not too humid or too hot!

The past two years have brought many changes. We moved into our own flat, I became a science teacher at a secondary school. My husband became a concessions manager for a men's wear company, getting used to paying the bills!

Unfortunately, my beloved father passed away last year and we still grieve for him. He helped us out in so many ways and gave us such a great start as a new couple and a new family. As my mother, sisters, my husband, myself and the rest of the family try to come to terms with our loss, we realize how lucky we are to be living in

Brighton and Hove, thanks to my father's decision to settle here over twenty years ago.

My married life

I'm in my thirties. I've experienced the extreme toughness and sadness of married life in both in Bangladesh and England. I blame poverty for my situation. The poor are supposed to suffer and not complain.

I was born to a single mother. She, as a victim of domestic violence, had returned to her parents during her first pregnancy. My mother's relations are very poor. After my birth my father and his family refused to take us back. For financial and social reasons my grandfather was also unable to take responsibility for us. Living as a young single mother with poor parents in a village invites lots of risks for obvious reasons, therefore my mother got married again to a simple person from a very ordinary family. I wasn't accepted by the family, but a poor childless aunt of mine kindly came forward to solve the problem and that's how my childhood started.

As soon as I become a youth I was told that my marriage had been arranged. That is the only information an orphan girl is entitled to regarding this vital matter. Eventually I got married with a very simple ceremony. The man I accept as my husband is much older than my natural father. After arriving at my in-laws, I discover the rest of the family - I have to live with his other wives and children. His first wife lives in London as he is a Londoner and has many grown up children who're settled in London. He will soon divorce his first wife. Hence, my marriage life starts with my husband being away from time to time in London. In his absence I'm the victim of my co-wives' jealousy, anger and frustration. I don't blame them because as the youngest wife I'll get the first chance to go to London. In addition, I've to cope with frequent pregnancy, bringing up children and doing household chores etc... Therefore, I spend a number of years of my married life in Bangladesh.

At last my co-wives' guess and the dream of my subconscious mind come true. My husband declares that I and my children have been chosen to go to London with him. I eagerly look forward to my new life in that dreamland without knowing what is waiting for me and my children. Sadly, it is a total disaster. My husband knew that he had lost his previous accommodation because of his long absence from London, but he assumed that his sons would provide temporary shelter until he got another council house. Alas, none of them agree to accept their old father and his family. Then he turns to two of his friends. Out of kindness one friend gives us day-shelter and the other gives us night-shelter. So every morning and night we move from one place to another with the children in a bitterly winter season. Out of desperation his friends help him to rent temporarily a one room flat in an isolated area of the city. After a month, just when we had started to feel a little relieved we were subjected to a violent evening. Our flat was viciously attacked by a group of thugs. They didn't find any valuables and they injured my husband with a knife. It is better not to reveal further details but certainly our London life ended and we were helped to move to Brighton and live temporarily as a homeless family with a distant relation.

Finally, because of our unique circumstances, Brighton Council kindly offered us a permanent home. From the very beginning I liked the place although I had to stay at home all the time. My freedom was severely restricted to prevent me from the gaze of young men's eyes. Still I was satisfied as my children were at school and were extremely happy. We had been living for less than two years in Brighton when the final, perhaps inevitable, chapter of my married life embraced me with the passing of my husband.

I am now a single parent. All my children are of school-going age and I have to bring them up single-handed. I'm grateful to the local services for helping me in various ways as otherwise I would not have survived with my family. Outwardly I try to maintain a smiling face for my children and others. But deep down my emotions are frozen, I have no tears left to shed. This is the outcome of a marriage life within polygamy.

I would like to end my story by thanking the person who helped me to put my thoughts into words. This is the first time in my life I felt valued.

Women's freedom

'Women when they get married - their first priority is their husbands.'

If a woman can stand up to her husband and say look this is my duty and this is your duty - you have to do this and I have to do that. If she can stand up and say it - that makes it easier. If she just says 'No, I have to do what my husband, my in-laws say' she is down, she's doing just whatever her family's expecting her to do.

It's still a male dominated society - even if you are educated and working.

Everybody likes freedom. Freedom is a touchstone. It gives life to an empty body. The dominated life is as painful as a life in prison. There is a heavenly pleasure to living a free life by abiding all the rules set for justice and injustice.

A married life starts with a lot of beautiful dreams between a boy and a girl. At the beginning both husband and wife are filled with happy dreams. Afterwards the duties of real life slowly start to make themselves felt. Sometimes the relationship is hurt by the difficulties of life. Sometimes destructive nature becomes obstacle and the probability of a storm in the sea of life becomes inevitable.

The male-ruled world tries to keep the women in its grip. Then the life of the wives turns into the life of birds in a cage. Their life becomes unbearable losing all the freedom of their life. Eventually a newborn baby comes to the family and the life of the women gets trapped in the family prison. Soon they lose themselves drowned in a sea of home and family.

In a home that has good understanding between husband and wife the children grow up beautifully. They get the opportunity to flourish fully. But children growing up in a home where there is lack of understanding are unfortunate. They cannot keep the

boat of life straight and soon lose their way and, as a result, they lose their confidence and feel helpless.

The family that does not look after its small children is not a healthy family. There the children will grow up according to the pattern set by their parents. Their desires have no value and for this reason their personality does not develop. They cannot be mature in the absence of freedom.

The children who grow up without care in their father's house are really unfortunate. Their soul cries for a little touch of tenderness. If they ever find a little bit of fondness they pour out their heart and fall in love and dare to find happiness in their life.

In this way the struggle for existence is lost in the stream of time, again new life starts with endless expectations and dreams.

Breaking up

Ten years ago, you didn't hear about divorce. It was not common at all; maybe in a few hundred weddings you might hear of one divorce, but now you hear of one every four or six months. You see the youngsters now, within months of getting married, separated or divorced. People think maybe that's because their thinking is more western - 'Oh why can't I just do that?' They're not willing to compromise like their mothers or older sisters would of done. They're becoming more independent, thinking of themselves more. The reason is because they are more educated and independent now. They know that if they get divorced they can look after themselves. Women used to be scared before.

There is a good side and a bad side. In our country there isn't any social security. But even those who are really independent and doing a good job, who get married and then divorced, saying 'I can look after myself.' - what position do they have in society? They don't have a good position. Everyone talks about them.

I think parents do a really good job, parents - in arranged marriages the girls and the boys get support. The whole family comes together. When the girl chooses her boyfriend it will probably be someone a similar age or a year older. The boy is not mature enough. When the parents look for someone, he might be eight or ten years older than her, he's mature and can take responsibility for his wife. That's what the parents think about.

It's the ones who are choosing that are breaking up the most. That's what's happening right now - the girl choosing the boy, the boy choosing the girl and after about six months or even one month, separation, divorce. They can't blame the parents for that.

If my girl chooses a boy and I see that boy is right for her - I would say yes and if I see that the boy is not right for her - I'd tell her.

Family

The family. The family are all here - you've got to see them at least every single week or day.

Friends are very important but for Bangladeshi people it's family.

Most have families here. My family is all here, about forty or fifty people: my brother, sister, their children, altogether about forty people so we don't need anyone outside. When we get together, we get together and we do whatever we want. They all live in Brighton so I don't need to go outside.

Everybody works so when they have the free time they are with their families. They visit their parents; visit their brothers and sisters and cousins.

My mother and my aunties they live in Brighton and Worthing so every week we see not just my brother and sisters but my aunties, their sons and daughters and their children. If we get them in one room it's about three hundred. That's my family.

My mum has six brothers and six sisters and most of us are here. There are hundreds of cousins and it's lovely, everyone knows everyone, everyone gets on with everyone. We see them at least once a month and at weddings. Everyone stays over.

I have three brothers and sisters and me living here, my husband's got family here as well in Brighton. We get on with others better than our family.

When I go back to Bangladesh I don't get with my family. I love them; they love us - but not everything. We can get on well, but we can't live together.

Because I'm living here alone with my husband, it is very difficult for me to go back and live with my in-laws. We are used to living here. I think the way I was brought up here, I don't think I could go back and stay there permanently.

With families, you might not like each other but you have to. Compromise, there's a lot of compromise.

Before, in Bangladesh, the wife would be in the kitchen and they'd have guests every day. The wife would be cooking all the time and entertaining. But nowadays they just go to the restaurant.

Leisure

Leisure time is spending time with the family. When they get time they go to Bangladesh or other countries.

Some girls nowadays they would like to go swimming and things but because of clothing and other restrictions they can't. They want to go out to the gym and swimming, keep fit but they can't wear swimming costumes and can't go in mixed pools.

We've got our own groups. We run our own groups. We've got our Asian groups. We've got funding and we do things we want to do. We do yoga and dancing and we go swimming and things.

I think in Brighton the Bangladeshis mainly get together when there is a wedding and that is just it really.

Change

Finance and education are more important now. Now people are more educated and independent, they live separately. When both the husband and the wife are working, they live in their own separate apartment and they don't join family life anymore. People are not compromising and living together.

But here the problem is getting worse. We married here, but my brother and my cousin married women from Bangladesh and brought them here but they refuse to look after their in-laws. They have a very difficult problem now.

Children

I think a Bangladeshi woman's life is dedicated to her family. After she gets married, it's her children and it never ends even when the children are grown up and they get married, you've still got the grandchildren. You've still got the children to think about, if the girl is happy in her married life - it never ends and I think her whole life is dedicated. I don't think a woman has a chance to say 'Oh I want to do something for me, me.'

In England changes are needed in child rearing - children are given too much freedom, they need to be taught respect. Children have no respect and there is anti-social behaviour. We need respect for things, for people, whatever. The thing is that children think the law is with them, the law protects them. That's ridiculous, basically the law is making them law breakers.

In Bangladesh at school the teachers are strict, that's how the children learn discipline; but here, if a teacher hits a child, that's it, they lose their jobs. We always taught our children - this is right and this is wrong - if he is or she is swearing, whether young or old we say to them - this is wrong you are not supposed to do that. When their children are swearing or fighting, my neighbours just watch and laugh. This makes the children worse. That's why we have to teach our children the way of our culture, society and religion but also to integrate with others in society and respect them all.

Lots of Bangladeshi boys are opting out in some ways. They are attracted to poor role models. That happens where both parents are working and not keeping their eye on the children. The father's role model is not good enough for the boys; they are not getting the father's attention. Fathers are the main problem, because even though some of the mothers are working, the father is the main breadwinner and he really hasn't got time for the children.

Sometimes what happens is this: the father goes out to work and the mother stays indoors - she doesn't speak English and she doesn't go out. The children go out and then maybe her son or daughter says that they going to school or college when they are not.

But you can't blame the parents if they have got to work long hours. I have teenage boys and it's a negotiation all the time.

Mothers take their daughters out and spend time with them, but fathers aren't doing that with their sons. In Bangladesh the father would have more time for the children. It's also more acceptable for girls to do well. It's not necessarily cool for boys to work hard. Also in Bangladesh there is competition over children's education. Parents compete with each other - 'My son's got this... my daughter's got that.' When exams come, they study, study all the time - it's about who gets the best grades. That's why children are doing better in Bangladesh, because parents are competitive about their children. I think it is starting to happen more here.

In Bangladesh you've got everybody - mother, father, uncle, aunty, grandmother, society, everybody's there to keep an eye on the children. Your children would be out playing and the neighbour would be aware of them. In Bangladesh, if my child goes out to the wrong places and my neighbours see him they come and tell me. No one is going to think it is alright, just because everyone else is doing it.

Respect

I was born in Bangladesh and brought up in an extended family with my two brothers, my parents, my grandparents, my six uncles, my aunts and my cousins. In 1989, after our marriage, I came to this country with my husband.

I missed all the family when I came here. Everything was new to me, some things I liked, others not. The worst thing for me was seeing elderly people being so neglected and alone. Here the young do not respect old people. The elderly do not get the respect they deserve. When people get old they can get very lonely and sometimes they don't even have anyone to talk to. They are lonely even when they have children - their children are busy with their own lives. This selfishness is unjust and very sad and seeing it is very painful for me.

I was brought up in a family where I always saw the elderly. I learnt to respect and listen to what they had to say and avoid doing anything that might hurt them. We tried always to abide by their good advice. The people of Bangladesh spend their old age with their sons or daughters and they are never forced through neglect to go to nursing homes. Those who do not have children stay with the children of their brothers or sisters or other relatives and they are very well cared for.

We were brought up living with our grandparents. We had a lovely relationship with them and we learnt from them. They helped us a lot and they give us their boundless love and affection. Their blessings were a treasure and I will always be grateful to them.

Cooking and eating

Cooking and eating are very important parts of our lives. I am in my fifties. I became expert in cooking at the age of sixteen. In Bangladeshi custom a girl should acquire this vital qualification before marriage. Every day we cook three to four items for lunch and dinner such as chicken or meat curry, Bangladeshi fish, vegetables etc.

If guests turn up at lunch or dinner time we don't get nervous at all and offer them to share food with us. We use lots of spices, herbs, oil and ghee in our cooking which makes the dishes very tasty. We do not use scales to measure ingredients; we use our eyes instead. I grow special Bangladeshi vegetables in my garden. Most English people enjoy eating our food, specially the chicken and meat curries, pilau rice and biriani dishes.

On the other hand English savoury dishes are not very appealing to us as, apart from fish & chips, the main dishes are either boiled or roasted and hardly any spices are used. But we really enjoy English sweet dishes as there are an amazing variety of cakes, biscuits and chocolates.

Although most of the English people enjoy our food very much they find it very hard to learn our cooking properly just as many of us find it difficult to speak English correctly or learn grammar & spelling properly. If I opened a Bangladeshi cookery class for my English teachers and asked them to cook lamb curry without measuring ingredients I am sure they would feel very nervous. Moreover, it could possibly take them years to learn cooking rice and rolling chapatti perfectly!

Who am I? - being British Asian

Fitting in

Maybe we all could understand each other better. I would like to see a mixed, more multi-cultural society, where everyone understands each other. with respect and knowledge of everyone's religion, culture and society.

One thing we find is that we can't get as close to English friends as we can with other communities. I've got Indian friends and a Thai friend who's been my best friend for three years. I find it is a bit different getting close to English people.

With Thai and Indian and African people, we feel they've got similar cultures and understanding. That's how we get close. I think the English people don't understand the religion or culture. They are always asking questions - 'Why do you do that?' - 'Why are you looking after your parents?'- 'Why do you wear clothes like that?' That's why it makes us distance.

I think of England as my country; I was born here - I live here - this is my country. My ethnic origin is Bangladeshi but I feel more strongly about this country. I can't imagine myself living in Bangladesh. But I am filled with our culture and I believe in the

religion. This is me, and I think of myself as British Asian. This is my country - I have children here. They've been brought up here.

A lot of people don't accept you as - British Asian. 'You're Asian - not British'.

My parents were from Bangladesh. They taught us a way of life - this culture and religion and even though I am teaching my children, I don't think they'll be the same as me. They are going to be slightly more western. Already, my daughter is fifteen and she says 'Why can't I go out with my friends? Why? Don't you trust me?' - of course I trust her.

Eleven years of my life were spent in Bangladesh. I grew up and went to school for a little education. That's it - all I remember. I know more things here. I don't think I would like to go back or settle down or anything like that. I don't think I can teach my daughter the things my mum taught me. We do teach them about the culture, the religion and the respect - but not deep down - those things my parents taught me - I hardly remember.

Children are taught the same things now, but it doesn't mean the same; what it meant when our parents taught us, because they were from Bangladesh. Their opinion was different. My opinion is different. My daughter's opinion is different.

You see more Muslim people wearing the Hijab in this country than in Bangladesh. Living in this country you see things that you don't like. The bad things you don't want to become and you don't want your children to become. I think that might be one reason why people are a bit more religious and try to stick to the Hijab.

Sometimes people face racism. We get a little bit of racism - a different way of looking, but in our country, it (the Hijab) is a little more respected, it protects.

We like the lifestyle here; it's different from the lifestyle in Bangladesh. Nobody is going to say to me the way I am living is right or wrong, but in Bangladesh if I live like this there will always be people making comments.

I don't like the politics in Bangladesh. Nobody here likes the politics in Bangladesh and we feel more free here than living in Bangladesh.

Living here, living like this, I can take my children to places and nobody is going to make any comment. That is the lifestyle here. Everyone does it. In Bangladesh they always pick on things. Maybe they don't like the food I like here or the way I'm living. People are changing...

At schools - what I find is - people say Bangladeshi women don't mix, and it's true they don't mix. But most of these women they can't speak a lot of English and the English parents don't really make an effort. It's their country. They can go up to someone. They might know that she doesn't know English. They could go up to them and say hello and try and make an effort. This might build their confidence - they might get the confidence to go up and say something themselves. So I think the parents need that encouragement. Even the teachers say 'They don't come to the meetings, they don't mix very well. They don't speak much.' But I'm sure that these parents don't like being isolated. They have no choice. I can speak English but when I go to pick my son up from school - parents don't make an effort to come up to me. They know me -

they see me working in the school - they know I can speak English. They don't really make an effort, but I'm confident enough to go up to them and ask things and have a chat. I just think of the other parents who are not so fortunate.

Bangladeshi children or British children have got to say hello to each other now. If they cannot say hello to each other there'll be problem twenty years later. This is the right time to say hello and then they will know each other and after twenty years they can work together, after twenty years they can share with each other and after twenty years they will not smack each other. This is the right time.

Equality in Britain and Hove Park

I think in Hove Park school there isn't actually much racism. I think this is because the school's pupils respect each other's culture, colour and religions. If you have a look at our class most people are originated from another country so there are a lot of people from abroad, from foreign, different parts of the world. Most people find it really interesting to find out about different cultures etc... and care about how they feel about it and the way they live.

But my family have experienced racism. In our old house in Brighton, an old lady tried to scare my parents by pouring hot water down our letter box and, once, dog's poo. She also banged on our door with a walking stick through our letter box. My mum said she did it because we made a lot of noise, but actually it was because she was racist as she used to shout racist comments at my parents. So we've experienced it in Brighton. In the whole country I don't think it happens a lot but there are racist people out there.

Raising children in a dual culture

When a Bengali mother comes to this country, she comes with a huge amount of courage and her Bangladeshi way of thinking. She thinks that her generous love and affection will be enough to raise her kids. Time passes by and the children grow up feeling the air and the sky of this country and absorbing its way of life. The mother tries her best to raise her children intellectually as Bengali Muslims, but the taste of free life and the culture of this country confuses the children. Opposition at home to every situation upsets them. We, the Bengali mothers want them to live embraced by a Bengali mentality and the children, as they grow up, find themselves in a helpless state. They can't decide what to do - which way to choose. Some submit themselves to their parents will against their own and others in their extreme helplessness become rebellious.

Who is responsible for the situation of these children? Who can solve their problem? The children can't understand it - when parents have sailed across an ocean of hope and aspiration and yet have held on to their Bangladeshi mentality. The parents' decision seems unrealistic. The children can't understand why there are so many hurdles, so many obstacles. They feel very sad. They feel that Bengali culture is itself the obstacle and it is at this point that rebellion starts. Who knows what the solution for this is? If we can't develop a spirit of compromise there will be nothing left but misery.

I think that this is a situation that will separate the worlds of the children and the parents. Time and tide wait for no one, they will keep going at their own pace.

And we, the mothers can't change ourselves. We hold onto the old ways of life and thinking. The children as they grow up marching forward at the speed of this country and, seeing that, we become afraid. We suffer depression - finding ourselves unable to imagine what the future holds for our children. Thus, the children's expectations of us are not fulfilled. Some bear emptiness in their heart while they keep on trying to make their children happy, but their way seems very grey. Those who can't accept it get stuck in their ways. But still they pray to God for their children's peace and happiness, wherever they might be.

Growing up

Growing up as a British Bangladeshi involves a lot of responsibility. I have to be a teenage girl, a Bengali, British and a Muslim at the same time! Being categorised as a Bangladeshi in a multi-cultural society does not feel like an alien concept, but it is an obligation and a way of life.

First generation Bengali's in this country have many responsibilities towards their parents - although for some, in today's society, these responsibilities are becoming an increasingly foreign concept. Why is this? Is it due to a fear of being labelled? Is it due to living in and adapting to the western world or could it be that we have lost our cultural roots?

It is naturally expected that children abide by a set of strict guidelines. Is it the rigid regime at the core of Bengali society that is responsible for their increasingly western behaviour?

The fact is, society has changed. Bengali children have been educated. We have been able to pursue good careers and have, as a result, been able to live wealthier and healthier lives. But we must never forget the main root of this success - our parents. Not only did they bring their cultural identity with them to this country but they have grown with and accepted the metamorphosis of British -Bangladeshi culture.

I am constantly learning from my parents' actions when dealing with us 'rampant' teens. In our small Bengali community in Brighton we are always faced with unfamiliar and new changes in the Bengali family life. Divorce, something that five years ago was an alien concept only mentioned in whispers by the middle-aged women of our community, has become increasingly common. The Bengali people have, through acceptance and support, managed this issue very well.

Our new generation of children have a lot more opportunities in life, as our parents have laid the foundation and opened the doors for us, and we will do so for our children, and so on. The doors are open and the boundaries have been crossed, so now our chief priority is to maintain our Bangladeshi identity. It is not necessarily a 'bad' thing to fit in with the western society or be 'too' Bengali. The secret is to balance both, and realise your limitations. Bangladeshi culture is exciting; bursting

with character, colour and culture, and one that is continually maturing. It should never be under-estimated.

The new generation has got a different way of thinking. They're the ones suffering. They have to maintain two cultures, two roles in society. In the community and family they have to maintain their way of life, the Bengali way, and when they go out with their friends they meet with English people and take up their ways. They are two persons.

We know that gradually, generation after generation, things will change. But still some of the people will keep the culture they inherited. They will try to keep it. Still we feel it. We have pain in our hearts. We don't want our children to leave the culture and let it fade. It is painful for us. We accept it, we have to, but still we feel pain.

Who am I?

Okay, it's a simple question. A human being, a young woman, that's easy enough, but not so easy for me to understand.

I am Bengali, I am a British Citizen, but I'm not English! I'm patriotic about England football matches and cricket games, but I'm not English. I have two identities, I have two lives, but which one is my own?

To my family and Bengali friends, I will always be a young Bengali woman. However, my life when I'm not with them tells a different story. It differs dramatically - I eat English food, I wear western clothing and I love fish and chips! I speak and write more English than I do Bengali, and most of the time I only speak Bengali out of respect. Is that right?

My freedom and choice of life in England is what I should be thankful for and yet I lay awake at night and wonder why Allah chose for me to be in this Bengali family. A Bengali in Britain, a Bengali female in Britain and a Muslim Bengali female in Britain at that. In any other place I would be restricted in so many ways and yet I still question my identity! My parents have freed me from those clichéd restrictions, something for which I am sometimes grateful and sometimes not.

Why should I have to explain myself all the time to my non-Bengali friends about the way I lead my life. My lifestyle, my way of leading this duplicitous journey, it can drive anyone crazy. To my non-Bengali friends, I am one of them and a level of sympathy falls into place when explaining why I am not able to do certain things with them. Why is that? It's not something for which I need sympathy. I prefer it that way. I would not be here if I did not like my Bengali culture. I respect my parents for allowing me the freedom to do most things I choose and experience a way of life about which they could only dream. I would never take advantage of the liberty and the level of trust they have shown me. This is who I am. This argument in my head is my own and I am blessed by Allah for having chosen me to have this adventurous discovery of a life worth living. Allowing me to choose my own path and I choose both.

Bangladeshi at heart

I am a German woman who married into the Bangladeshi community. I met my husband through my brother in Germany, twenty-six years ago and have been happily married now for almost twenty-five years. The fact that, even at a young age, he had such a mature way of looking at life and was planning for the future made him stand out for me, especially when I compared him to the European men who, at that age, mostly just thought of fun and partying all the time. I found myself thinking that I could build a future with someone like him, someone with whom I could be happy and build a steady home.

I first visited Bangladesh to meet my in-laws when my first child was seven months old. I was felt very nervous about going to a different country and having to adjust to their way of living. But to my amazement, the warmth and loyalty of the people over there made me feel very safe and wanted. What I loved most about my in-laws was how they accepted me into the family with open arms. The love they gave me felt as if they were my parents and not my husbands. I was surrounded by family members, with everyone admiring their new European relative. For the first time in my life I was the centre of attention and I loved every minute of it. That everyone was so concerned about my well-being gave me an amazing feeling. I adjusted to life as a Bangladeshi woman easily because the culture and traditions made me feel loved and safe.

Staying in Bangladesh for six weeks helped me a lot with the Bengali language. Their culture and costumes fascinated me and I started to dress in sarees and kameezes just like them. In Bangladeshi communities, family ties are very strong and they always keep in touch with all their family members. In Germany I didn't even know all my cousins.

We finally moved to London from Germany, as my husband had a lot of family living there. I brought up three of my children in London. We didn't like living there as it was too busy and we felt that it was not good for raising young children.

My husband had two sisters living in Hove and we visited them regularly. We would come down during school holidays and stay for a while. The seaside town captured our hearts and we fell in love with it. The big decision to move to Hove came when we saw a business opportunity.

We moved in December 1992. The business did well and we were pleased with our decision. Our Bangladeshi cash and carry put us right in the middle of the Bangladeshi community in Hove. The community was small to begin with, but we noticed, as the years went by, more and more Bangladeshi people moving from other cities to live in Brighton & Hove.

In 1994 we had our fourth child. All of my children speak fluent Bengali. I feel that the closeness of the family made it possible for them to hear, speak and learn the language well. My children have accepted Bangladeshi culture as I have done. They integrate with the community well and know all the do's and don'ts of Bangladeshi

culture. My eldest daughter is happily married to a Bengali boy and has two children of her own. My eldest son works at the police station in Seaford and my younger son is still studying in college. My younger daughter is still in school. I am proud of them for being such wonderful children. I have never looked back or regretted marrying into a Bengali family and I now see myself as a Bengali, rather than a European, woman.

Learning

A lot depends on education. A lot depends on what background they come from. A girl for instance may be broadminded and educated, but if the parents never went to school, there might, in the family and in their tradition, be barriers that stop her taking some routes. She cannot go forward because people are saying -no you cannot talk with a man. Now this is basically old-fashioned. This is wrong.

When you've got small children it's different but when those children become teenagers you worry about their education. You want them to get a better education than you had.

I'm fairly new to England and I am amazed by the wonderful learning opportunities provided here. Babies, even before their first birthday, start learning various things through play activities in a crèche. There are many nurseries and playgroups for toddlers and so children are well-prepared to start at primary school.

In contrast the children in Bangladesh start school at the age of six without having any pre-school experience. Almost immediately they have to get used to a school routine and discipline which is extremely strict. Children are punished heavily if they fail to bring homework which makes them frightened of coming to school. The method of teaching English does nothing to help them learn the subject properly. The syllabus is limited and the pupils are taught the contents of the text book by rote.

According to Bengali custom students are expected to highly respect their teachers both in school and college. Teachers are called 'Sir' or 'Madam' and not by their surnames. In England teachers are very friendly and they encourage students to express their views and feelings. In Bangladesh discussion is not expected in a class. Teachers are very reserved and the students are frightened of them. This situation does not help the students to enjoy learning freely in a relaxed atmosphere and, as a result, they fail to achieve good results.

In Brighton the local Community Education Centres provide great opportunities for us to learn English by arranging various ESOL classes free of charge. I am very pleased to be able to attend these classes and I am very grateful to the organisers and teachers.

The value of education

'People used to think that being doctor, an engineer or a lawyer would give their children a good life. But nowadays you can't push children. Because they have to have their way - what they like - the subjects they like and the subjects they're interested in.'

'Bangladeshi generations are growing – the children these days are taking higher education. Previously the Bangladeshi intention was to work in a restaurant but today's generation are not working in restaurants. Now they are thinking a little bit differently. They will have office careers etc. I would give them support to make that their aim. They should be able to contribute and have a different way of understanding culture, colour, nation, society and respect.'

I was born and brought up in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, I could not complete my education. I am fairly new to England but I am determined to achieve as much as I can academically. In Bangladesh there are a limited number of universities, medical colleges or other appropriate institutions to study specific subjects. Studying is very expensive too and this might be one of the reasons why some people are not very keen to get into higher education. Educated people in Bangladesh usually pursue the professions of medicine, teaching, engineering or office work.

I find adult education in England really impressive. Here students from different backgrounds have the opportunity to study subjects according to their ability and choice. People come to this country from all over the world to fulfil their academic ambitions.

There are Bangladeshi people of limited education spread over the world. Their aim is to increase their income and improve their lifestyle. They try to make as much money as they can by doing any type of work.

There is a large Bangladeshi community in Brighton which includes a good number of the younger generation. They, as in other communities, have got scope for study, but unfortunately most of them are not interested in a university education or even any further studies. The majority of the boys are only enthusiastic about earning money and not acquiring knowledge. Some girls wish to get into higher education after taking GCSE, but old fashioned cultural values, society and parental control prevent them from doing so. Hence, we are far more backward in education compared to other nations.

The human race is the most powerful source of all creation on this earth. It is capable of knowing the world from inside and outside. I feel a nation is incomplete without education. Without parent's, guardian's or carer's support it will not possible to create a bright future for our younger generation.

Language

I am 9 years old. I can speak English, Bengali and have started to speak Arabic. It's not easy to balance three languages at once, but I'm working hard so it's getting easier and more interesting as I move on.

Besides going to school, my mum teaches me Bengali at home. I found reading Bengali easy at first because it was just alphabet but now it's harder because I'm reading stories and new words every day. Also, every Saturday I go to Muslim school to learn to read and write Arabic.

The best thing about learning Bengali is that I can speak to anyone in Bangladesh. I'm glad I can speak Bengali, because I find it easy to communicate with my grandparents and relatives.

English, Reading & TV

It is sometimes very difficult for us because we've got to learn our own language, English and on top of that we've got to learn Arabic as well. Not talking, but reading, it's very tough.

I haven't learnt properly yet. I used to watch children's programmes in the morning - Rainbow, Playschool.

I didn't learn English from my children because I wanted my children not to forget my language. I always speak to them in Bengali. That's why I couldn't learn English very quickly. I learnt English from television and from reading books. I read everything, children's storybooks, my husband's medical journals - some I understood and some I didn't. I also watched children's TV. But I never spoke with my children in English. If I had, I would have learnt better.

Bengali is my children's first language. They speak Bengali fluently - but they speak all the time with their brothers and sisters in English.

I read mostly in Bengali but I read English also - some books can help you with meditation and the ways of living life.

I've read *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. When I see anyone change or when sometimes my husband has shut up and I want to know why he's quiet, then I just go and read the book.

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