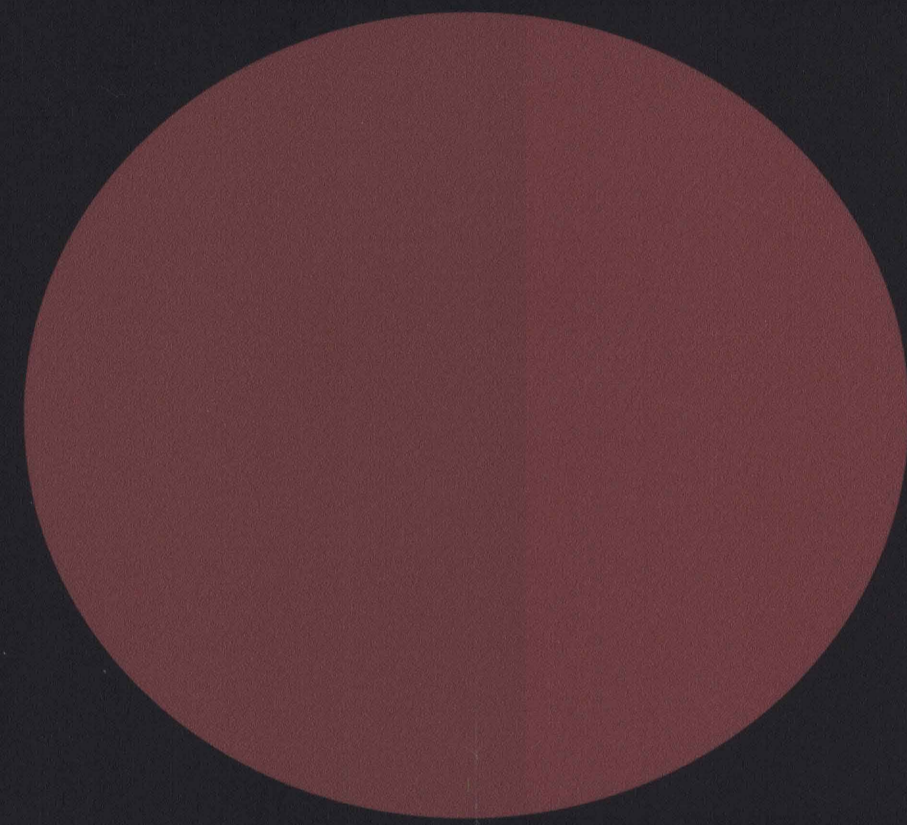
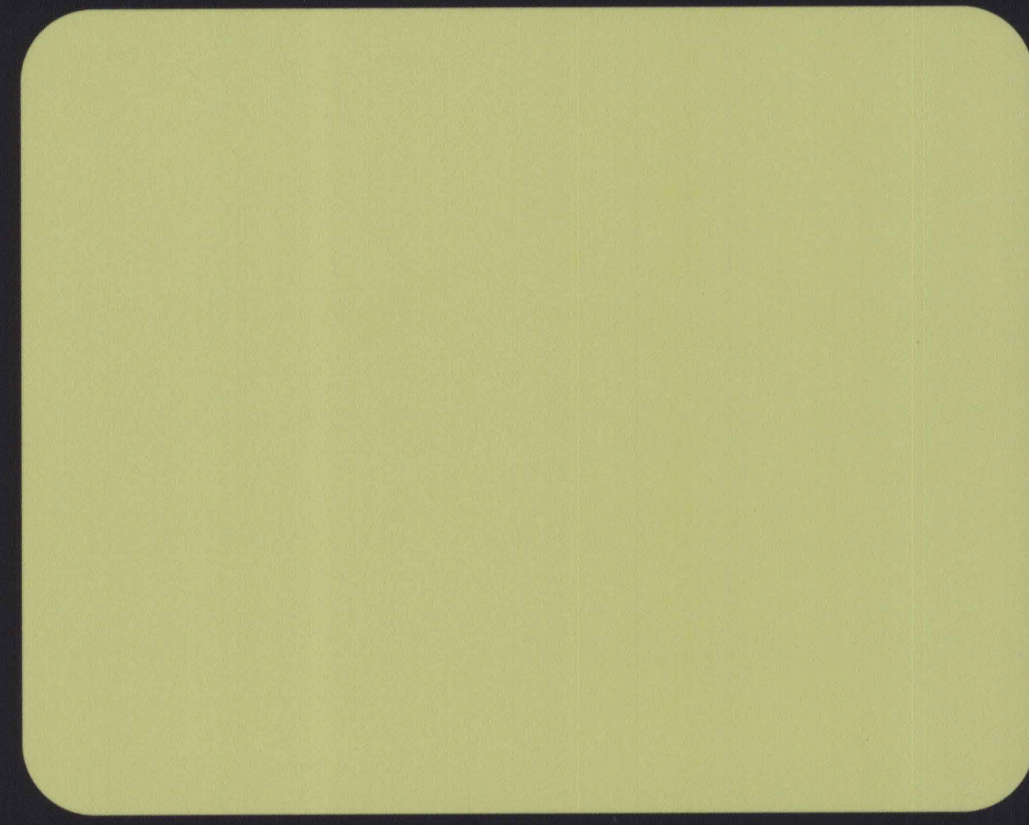
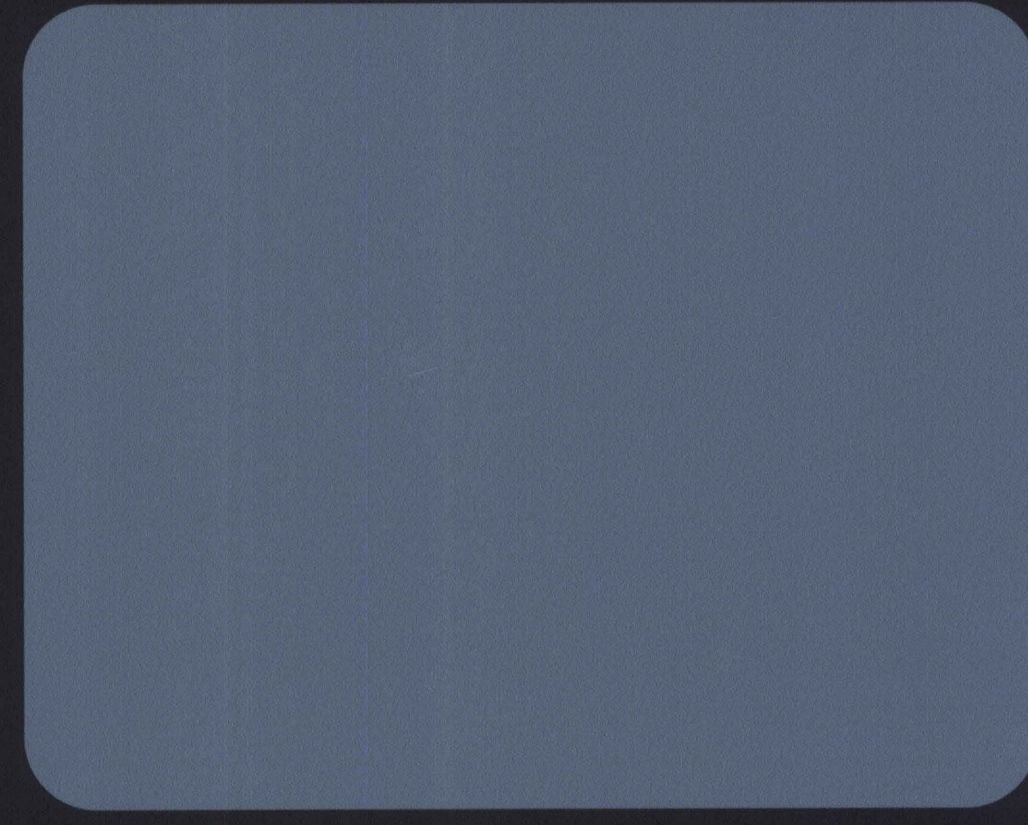

Here & There



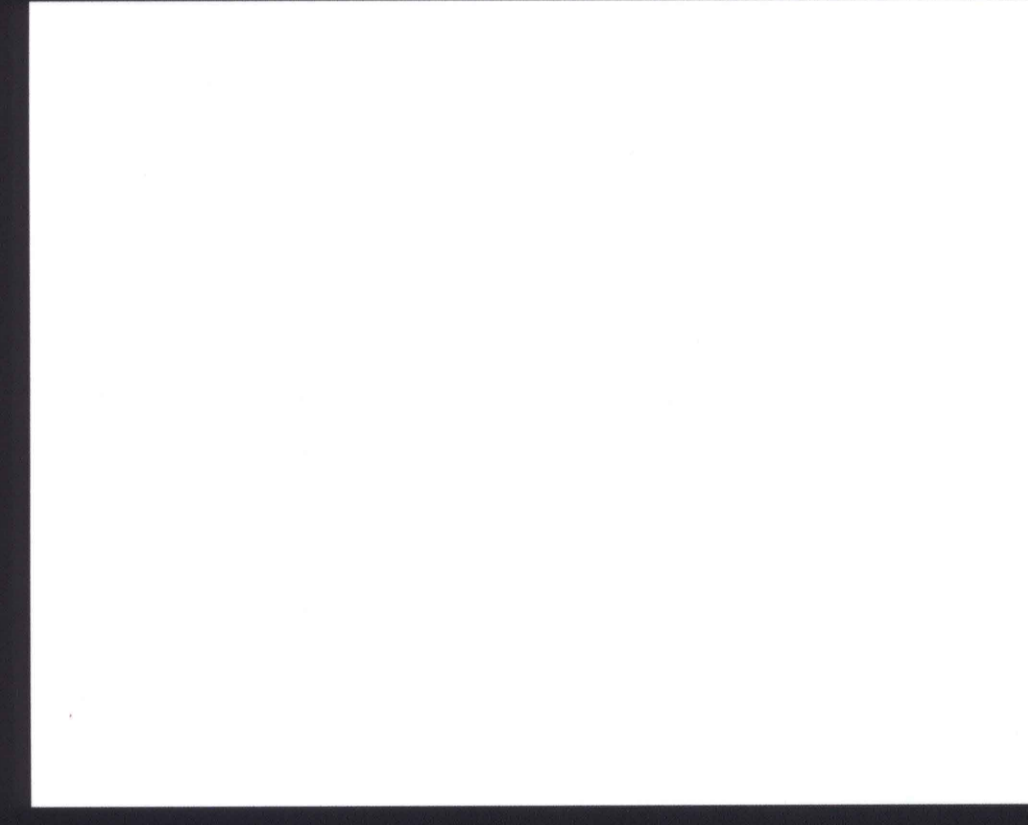
| From Bangladesh |



| Across Land |

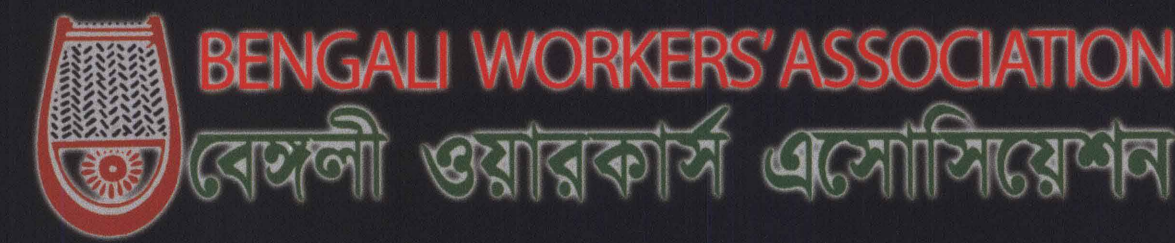
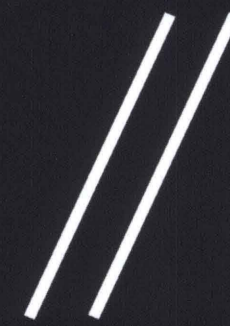


| Across Oceans |



| ...to London |

Stories of British Bangladeshis in Camden



Village life in East Bengal//1940 - 1970



When I grow up I will travel the world...

"In the morning we used to study Arabic. In those days we never really used to have breakfast. There was no tea, coffee. So when my mother woke us up we used to go to study Arabic, then we used to come home, have a bath and then go to school. When I wasn't in school I used to go out a lot and take care of the farm animals. I was a naughty boy, so I used to go out a lot with my friends. I used to go Jatra to listen to music. I used to go fishing and swimming. My mum used to ask me what am I going to do with my life. I used to tell her this poem

*When I grow up
I will travel the world and see the countries near and far
I will travel on the ship and will have no fear
I will see whether it is near or far
I will go by ship without any fear
Over the blue sea and the blue sky
I will see the world when the ship will arrive at the
harbour
I will learn many things in [many] countries
I will return home with a smile wearing the hat of
knowledge"*

Hason Miah

Playing Football near the roads...

"We played football, kofti (kabadi), bondi. We played football near the roads but couldn't play during monsoon. When we got a bit older we used to sneak out to singing at the Hindu festivals, there was Doolorgaans (a type of folk music with dhols) and fakir melas (sufi festivals). We would sneak there without our parents finding out, and sneak back to sleep, otherwise we would get in trouble. Then as we grew older we started to learn to do the work in the fields. We had no cars, we ate in plates made of clay, wore markin as we didn't have lungis..."

Kolomdar Ali

Playing picnic and swimming in the pond...

"My family used to farm a lot which I liked. In those days we didn't have electricity. You know when we were young, it was so dark, but we still didn't have any issues, now come to think of it, it feels quite funny. We used to play with the red bricks... make pretend spices for curries... used to do a lot of fishing and cook real curries with the fish. The game was called picnic as we used to cook and eat in the outdoors. ...then we used to go to the pond to swim and have a wash. Once we were clean, we would all seat together and eat. Although the food didn't always taste good, we really enjoyed ourselves. I used to love animals. I grew up in a village, I never lived in the town. In our farm we had goats, buffalos and cows. I had my own buffalo that I used to look after as a pet. ...I will tell you about one of my friends who passed away 2 years ago. She was really hard working. In those days we had this machine called 'DEKI' - do you know what that is. You control it with your foot. I sometimes used to help her with that. I used to tell her to finish it quickly... she also used to wash the dishes. I never used to do those things although I knew how to. For her it was a must, but I didn't like the fact that she did those things, as I didn't do those things. I liked going out, I didn't stay home. I would rather take the goat out, look after it, but household work wasn't something that I enjoyed much. Meeting people, having a laugh is what I enjoyed.

Rina Begum

Sleeping on mats made of bamboo...

"My dad was the only child. Then my grandfather remarried and then my father had 2 brothers and 1 sister. We all used to live together. After my grandfather passed away my father took care of all of us. We lived together until my uncles got married. They all moved away after they married. They are all gone now. I used to love living with everyone. We all had separate quarters but we used to eat together. There used to be fights and so we separated from our uncles. ...In those days people used to sleep on the floor and on mats (made of bamboo). We didn't even have toilets in the house. People used to go outside in the bushes to relieve themselves. It sounds embarrassing, but that's how it was for poor people. Now God has given us the ability to build toilets."

Hason Miah



Muslims and Hindus living together...

There were mainly Hindus in my village. There was a 'Ghosh' bari - they used produce yogurt (Ghosh is a Hindu clan) nearby and also nafith bari (nafith means barber), teli bari (someone who produces different types of oil). The smell of boiled mustard oil was so strong that we couldn't walk past his house. There were many fishermen who used to go straight to work as soon as they woke up. We had all types of people and we were very happy. Unfortunately they have all but one nafith, left for India. During the war they were afraid of being killed. We bought their houses, they were massive houses. It hurt to see them leave. We begged them to stay. They left everything behind. We cried and begged but they were too scared and left. They didn't blame us for (Muslims) what was happening to them.

Shundor Miah



Images: Kapadi // Outdoor Toilet in a village - The poor people in Bangladesh still use makeshift toilets made of bamboo and dried leaves

Village//

Education in East Bengal // 1940 - 1970



30s and 40s

Abdul Momen – Going to 9 different schools...

“My first school was in Calcutta; my father’s job as a postmaster was transferable so we soon returned to the place I was born where I attended this school. I was born in 1938. When the Partition took place in 1947, my father opted to go to East Pakistan which is now Bangladesh. My brother, sister and I remained in India for a year or so before we joined our father in Pakistan. I have this interesting history of going to nine schools and I learnt from these different levels of experience but it did a lot of harm to me as I was a keen football player. We never stayed in one place long enough to be accepted by a team; before I got used to a school my Father ended up being transferred to another place. If this didn’t happen, I think I would have been a good football player by now... I went to 2 schools in India and 7 in Bangladesh.”

Mobura Banu – using banana leaf as paper and bamboo stick as pen...

“...after waking up we would go to school, but we didn’t have pen or ink, so we would cut sticks of bamboo and squeeze berries and use a banana leaf as paper. That was a bygone era. The school was not very far, it was in near my village. We used to wear Gaghri and a shawl. We had to wear a headscarf, if we didn’t our fathers or uncles will tell us off.”

Hason Miah - Skipping schools in those days...

“I started hanging out with a bad boy and so I started missing school and used to hang out in a fakir bari (house of a peasant). When my dad found out he wasn’t happy and told me off. ...there were lots of us but there were 4 teachers. They were all Hindu. The teachers had tables and chairs but we used to seat on the floor. When we moved up to class three we used to seat on benches. The boys and the girls used to be in the same class. This was in Goyghor school. After the school became known as Abdalpur school. I studied up to primary level. I used to wear lungi and shirt. We used to wear sandals made of skin. We used to learn poetry. I remember a lot of poetry because I never used to do any studies. I didn’t continue my study because my father wasn’t able to afford it. This was a struggle for us.”



Image: School in a village

Bani Begum - Girls' Education in a city

“I can’t remember everything, it was a long time ago, I went to school. Yes, it was called Gulzar Begum School, in Chittagong. We used to wear Shalwar Kameez. [We used to start] around 9 o’clock. There used to be a young woman who would take us, we would call her Deedee, she escort us all to school, we would be ready when she called for us. Back then it wasn’t acceptable for us to go on our own, so we would get escorted by this woman who was sent by the school. I went to college here in the UK; I studied language, trained and then got a job.”

50s and 60s

Sajjat Miah - Sitting outside to learn

“In our days we used to seat outside on benches. I also used to get 2 hours private tuition after school. My teacher used to say “I will teach you a word and you must repeat the word 7 times whilst looking at an object you like”. So basically when I looked at the object, I would remember the word that I learnt. My teacher has taught me a lot but I would call myself self-taught. I like to research things myself and teach myself, for e.g. I once saw my father making fans from bamboo and leaves, so I told myself, if he can make one, then so can I. so I made a fan one day. I didn’t tell my dad. In those days we never used to tell our parents because if they found out they would think we aren’t doing our studies! When my dad saw my fan he was really impressed. I can make fans with paper as well.”

Siddek Miah – There were no benches in the classroom

“When I was small I went to school, sometimes I would skip school to go and play, then get told off by my parents. The school wasn’t very far... it was in the village, about ten minutes walk away. I studied from class 1 right up to class 5. We had mixture of both Hindu and Bengali teachers and taught us mostly Bengali and then English. I started when I was seven years old and left at twelve or thirteen because I went to a study at a Madrasa. I started with the basic Qaida and finished with the Quran.”

Education //

Love & Respect // Marriage // 1950 - 1960

50s and 60s

Hason Miah – love and respect...

"I was already married when coming to UK. I got married young. But I can't tell you my age as I don't know. In those days men married late, if you have money, then fathers were able to get you married at a younger age. Now in my family there were few of us who had to get married. We actually had no money. I got married when I was about 20 years old. It was a marriage arranged by my father. I was married early to look after my mother who was not well. I haven't seen my wife before my wedding. I agreed to marry whoever my father chose for me. At that time there was no such tradition that the bride and groom will meet each other before their marriage. Now it has all changed. These days the girls see the boys and the boys see the girls. There was no such thing in those days." "On my wedding day I was being carried by a Palki (carried on shoulder by four people) to my in laws house three mile away. We had loads of food. We had meat, rice and morobba (sweet made of marrow). On my first night I did not talk to my wife in front of any one. If my parents were around she used to go somewhere else as in those days we couldn't really talk in front of our elders. Sometimes I used to ask if she was ok. I would speak to her using 'Apni' (a word used when referring to an elder or out of respect). You see there is nothing wrong with saying Salaam (Muslim greeting) to your wife or speaking to her in a polite way although many people would say what is the point of saying 'salaam' to your wife. My view is I have a child and if he watches me treating my wife with respect then he would learn to treat people with respect."

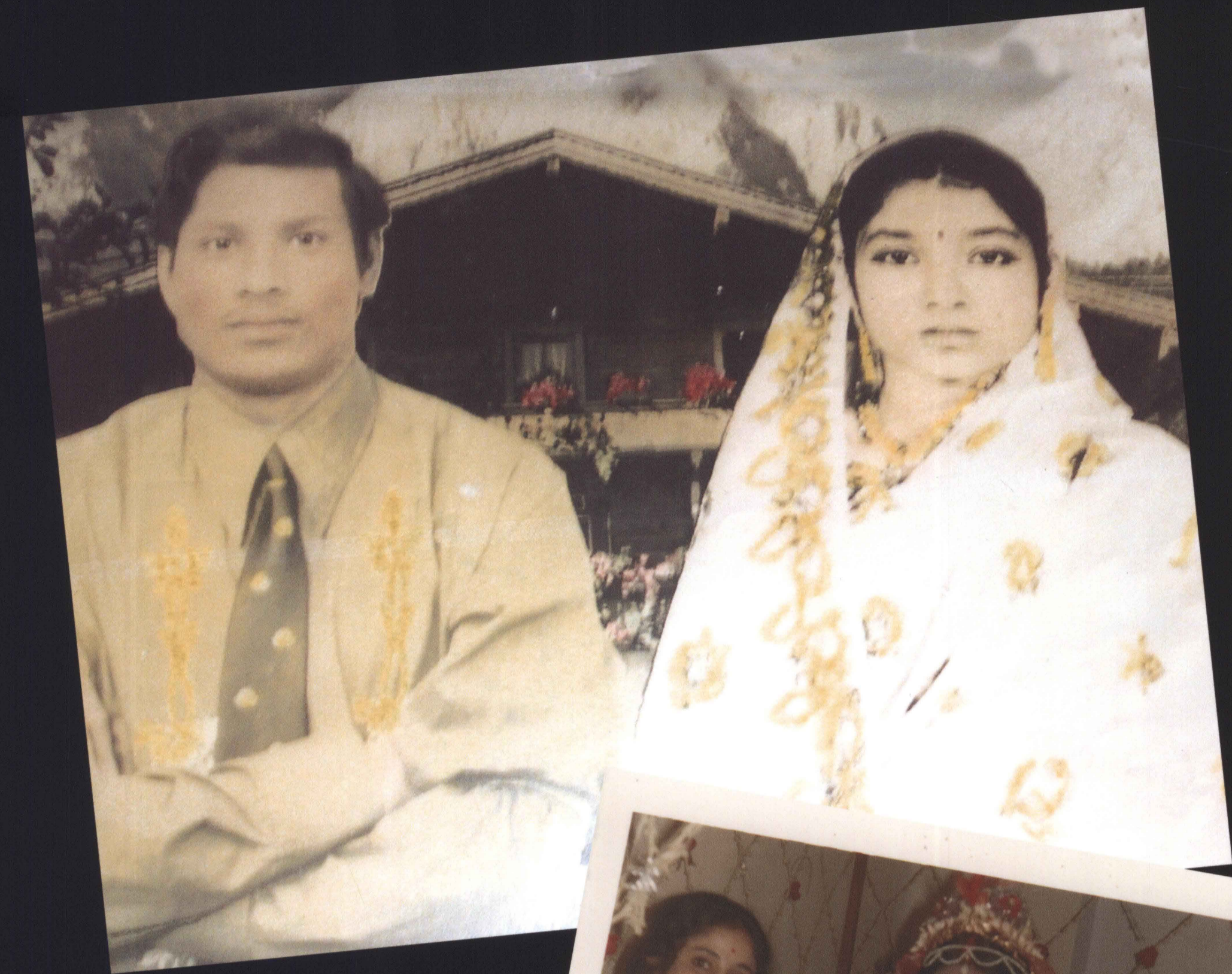


Newa bibi – "Brother and Uncles didn't come to the wedding as they felt I was too young..."

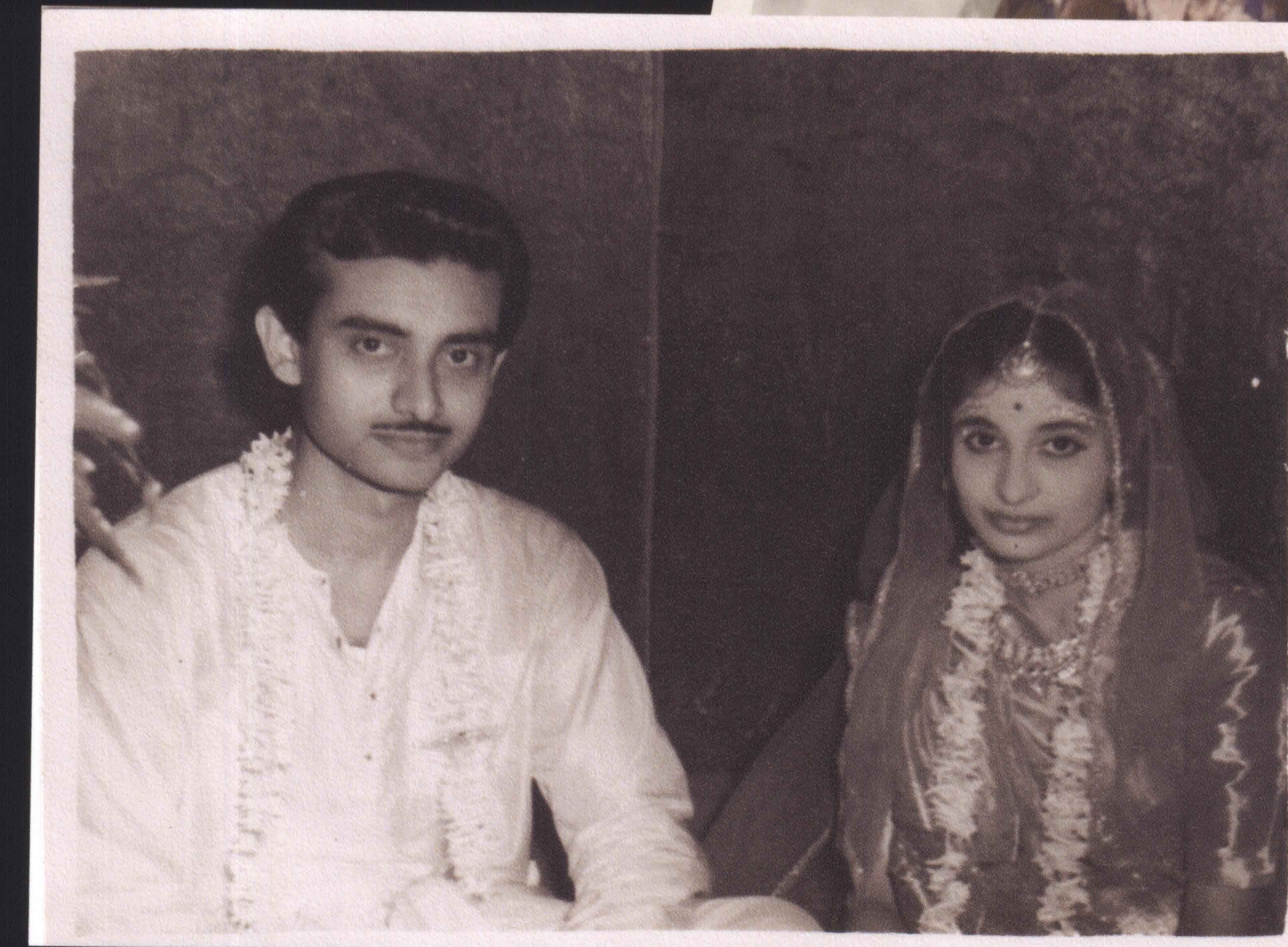
I was 12, my husband was a friend of my brother who was in Assam. After I was married I stayed with my in-laws whilst he went back to Assam, they looked after me because I was still a little child. There was older sister in law who did all the cooking because she was older so I didn't have to. I remember my wedding day well... there was a little ill feeling during my wedding, because my eldest brother didn't want me to marry at that age, but my other brother was a little grumpy and insisted on his way and wouldn't listen to him or my uncles. So they didn't come to my wedding.

Mobura Banu – "I used to ask Allah to make me a bird so I can return home..."

My father said Kabul (accepting proposal) on my behalf, he said Kabul, do you understand? I was too young, I didn't understand, I used to cry to return home. I used to say Allah make me a bird so I can fly home, understand. ...When they were carrying me to my husband's village in my bridal carriage, I was holding onto my brother-in-laws' hand, one on each side, and I was crying all the way there. My mother-in-law was also my maternal aunt, she was very nice to me, but that did not stop me from wanting to return home. My husband was about 30 or 35 years older than me. Now of course they wait till the girls are older and more aware and give their consent. Back then the girls had to stay out of sight, and were married before they hit puberty so that they would not have to worry about their honour, do you understand?...

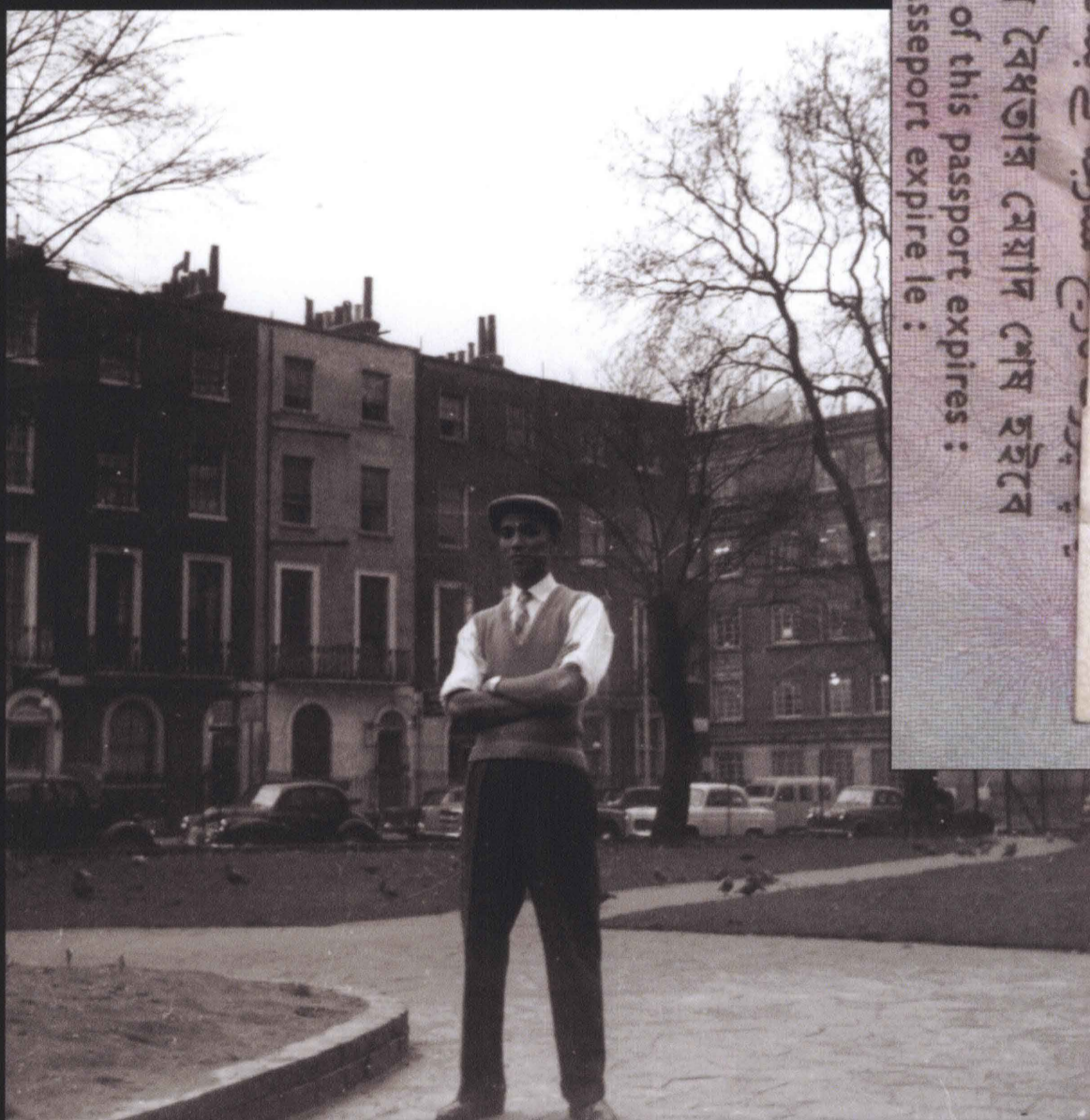
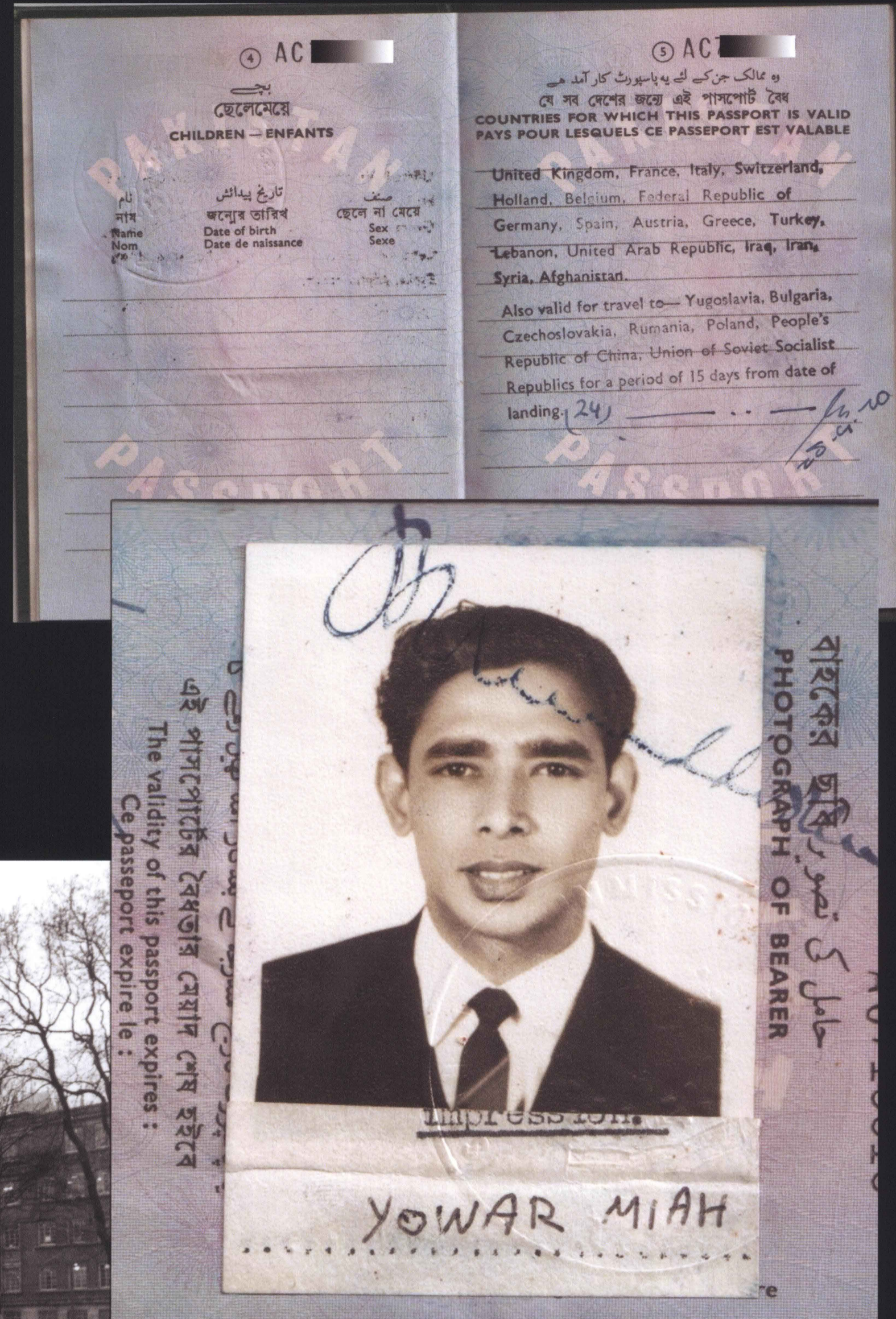
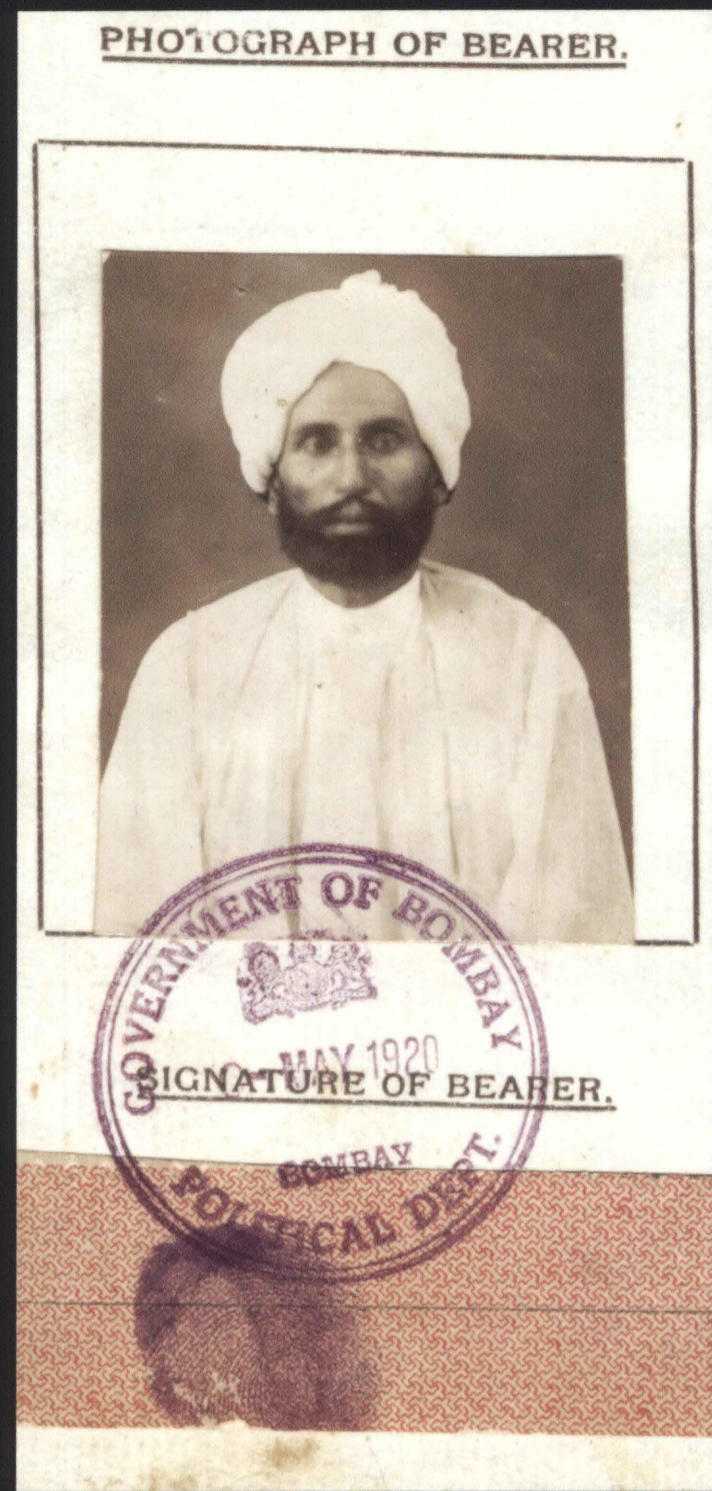


Images: Bengali Wedding (top) // Fateha Choudhury // Biti Das with family // Biti Das with husband



Marriage //

Sole journey to Britain//Bringing Family to Britain



Images above (Above left to bottom left)

An ID Card of Lascar Seamen // The passport was valid for the countries listed // Yowar Miah Passport Photo // Abdul Shmsuddin Ahmed's nephew: Shahid (Mashahid Ali Chowdury in London, c. 1958 - 59.

50s Abdul Shamsuddin Ahmed – coming in 1957

“My friend asked how do you go to UK? I said that all you needed was a passport; he didn't believe it was that easy! ...I came here in 1957, when I first arrived I stayed in Brick Lane, then I came to King's Cross, then Shahid bought a house and said “Uncle you come too”. Four of us lived in that house; Moklis Rahman who had come to study to become a barrister, and my brother-in-law who was sent by the government on a medical study visa. I also brought my brother over; he was studying and living in a hostel in Maulwibazar. But in 1962, a friend of mine came back from a visit to Bangladesh and told me that my brother was misbehaving, he advised me to stop paying for his studies and bring him to UK. So in 1962 I sent all the paperwork to sponsor my brother to come here.”

60's and 70's

Joban Ali - I had to take care of myself and my 6 brothers...

“[I am] over 100 years old. I can't remember for sure. I'd tell you the date of birth stated on my passport if I remembered that too (19.04.1922). I had no intention of coming here. Only Allah can tell you. I've been to many different places to look for work. I've been to Dhaka, Borishal, Maymanshingh... been to so many places. You have to feed yourself right? I came to UK when I was a father of 4. I had to come here as we were struggling, we had nothing. My father asked me to take care of my brothers. This is when I became bound to help my family...”

Shundor Miah – “I came to UK as I used to spend all the money my brother sent on football”

“As many members of my family lived abroad I felt no need to move to UK. But my brother gave me 35,000 taka to build a house. But I spent all the money in football tournaments...at the time we all lived together including my cousins, so my cousin told my brother not to send me any money as I keep spending money in football matches. When I found out about this I knew there is going to be trouble so decided that I should move to London... I was about 30 years old. I was already married by then.”

Hason Miah – Getting a loan to come to UK

“My wife was able to get a loan from her relatives for me to be able to buy my ticket to UK. I have paid them all back. The first time I went to Dhaka was when I had to sort out my visa and tickets. I used to go to Srimongol, then to Akhaura (a big train junction), from there I used to catch a train to Dhaka. It was a big struggle. This was obviously the first time on the plane as well. I was with a man called Sattar Miah. I came to this country in 63. I first went to Pakistan and then to London.”

Sajjat Miah – Coming to UK at age of 9 and going back to fight for independence

“I came to UK in 1969. When I first moved to UK I stayed in Hampton court palace. Initially I thought I was only coming to UK for a visit. My father told me I would go back home after I get my passport... he used to work where the BT tower is currently based. It used to be the post office tower back then. His Manager sent a letter to the high commission who invited my father for an interview. They gave my father the permission to bring the whole family but my father initially brought me and my brother over however went back in '71 when I participated in the independence of Bangladesh. I was in Bangladesh for 14 months. ... I came back in '72.”

Siddek Miah – coming at the age of 16

“I was Sixteen when I came. My father brought my elder brothers over using the vouchers; I was the last one to be brought over. He used a family voucher and brought my mother over as well, but one of my brothers was over the allowable age, so he didn't get permission to come. We had our passports made and then we went to the interview in Dhaka...they asked about the bari, how many houses, about the extended family, how many aunts and uncles and cousins we had. Everyone told me that it would be good for me to come to this country... that I had studied and it would be better to go to England rather than waste my education back in Bangladesh. I came here in 1977. We came by coach to Sylhet, then by plane to Dhaka, Dubai and then London. I felt happy, I liked it... there were lots of different people, it was new and exciting. We stayed in Gower Street. My brother already lived there and my mother and I came to join him and my father. My brother was already married but didn't bring his family until much later. I tried to learn to speak English and went to some classes, but I didn't have time because I was working most of the time.”

Bringing family to Britain...

Kolomdar Ali – bringing family over as there was nothing left in Bangladesh

“I looked at my family back home, and what was happening and realised that I couldn't stay there anymore, there was nothing left for me there as I left everything behind as I fell out with my brother. So I applied and brought them over. I brought them to 23 Talbot Square. We stayed a week, and then we went to the Town Hall with them, they sent us to a hotel, 46 Gloucester Place Hotel where we stayed for a year, then the hotel caught fire...I was at work, I returned early in the morning I found a whole bunch of people and police in front of the hotel. I was told by another man who had also been in the hotel that our hotel caught fire... I felt that I couldn't see anything in front of my eyes, and I was unsteady on my feet. Then the man said that my family was safe, but a family from the top floor... a woman and two children died. ...a year later I was given a house in Silverdale.”

Shomirun Khatun – Daughters weren't allowed to stay in UK...

“I came to this country (1971) with two sons and two daughters, but he (husband) sent my daughters and never brought them back, I cried constantly for them, because I missed them so much. ... The boys were allowed to stay because they were earning, but my girls were sent back. ...I also have another son that I didn't bring over originally and he also hasn't been able to come over as he didn't get a visa.”

Shahera Begum – Not being able to come to UK with the children...

“I sent the children [to UK] in 1994, because I was being abused physically and verbally by my husband's relatives when he wasn't there. The girl was 11, a boy was 8 and the youngest was 7. I was the second wife, and I didn't want them to suffer. But then I drove myself crazy worrying about whether they were being looked after, whether they were getting food and clothing, because my husband was very old and still had his first wife and couldn't bring me over when I sent the children. ...I came in 1999.”

Migration//

Life in the UK // 1950 - 1980

80s

Rina Begum

"When I first came [in 1985], I used to cry a lot, as in the village we all lived together, here I was all alone, I didn't know how to cook, didn't know how to do anything. My husband used to cook for me and showed me how to cook. He used to take me out to Oxford Street, Hyde Park and places like that. We used to walk a lot, now I didn't like walking. I used to wonder how people could walk so much, they have such long strides. My husband used to tell me you have to walk like this. I remember one day the skin on my heel came off and it was bleeding. I am talking about something that happened 27 years ago. We never used to wear shoes in the village but here I had to wear them. ... I wore saris as I didn't like wearing trousers or salwar kameezes. But it was difficult in saris as it was cold. When I used to go to my uncle's house, they used to ask where we came from and used to get really shocked by how much walking we did. But my husband used to say in this country you have to walk a lot. After giving birth to my first child, my son in '86, I used to feel really down as I was all alone. But then my mother in law and sister in law came to visit me from Bangladesh which was really nice. You know it was hard raising children all alone. In Bangladesh you have so many people to take care of children, but here I had no one. I even see it today, so many women that don't know how to look after their children. The reason is in Bangladesh we are from an environment where there are so many people around you that teach you. The mother would rest, sleep and eat as there are other people around. But I never had that. I remember I used to wake up at night to feed my child and used to be really sleepy. I used to feel bad my son as he had no one else caring for him even though his dad was there, I still used to worry about who would look after him when I am cooking. So I used to stay with him until his father came from work and then I used to go to cook. I only used to cook one curry and rice. I remember sometimes I couldn't even cook so I used to eat cold rice. It was difficult. I had to do everything alone and my husband didn't do much at home, he didn't really help me."

Camden Today...

Anwarunessa Begum

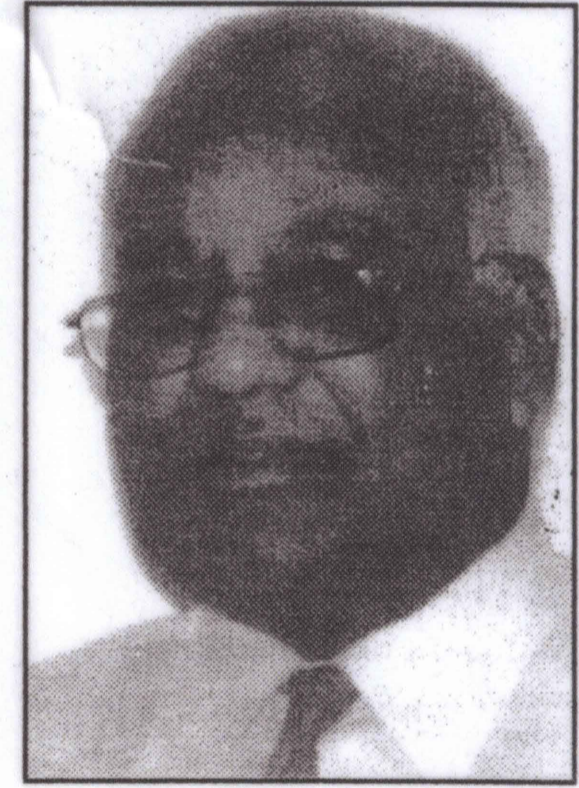
"I think Bengali people have changed a lot in Camden. When I moved here women used to go out wearing saris and now I see women going out in burkas, they have become more devout Muslims. Before boys used to go into restaurant work but now children these days are going into education to become doctors and solicitors. Both boys and girls are studying. I have an interest in education but my time is gone. However I want to learn to speak English so that I can become independent. I think I can do everything apart from speaking English."

Syed Azizul Ilam recieved an MBE for his services in 2005

সৈয়দ আজিজুল ইসলামের এমবিই খেতাব লাভ

সাউথ লন্ডনের বাঙ্গালি কমিউনিটির বিশিষ্ট ব্যক্তিত্ব সৈয়দ আজিজুল ইসলাম এমবিই খেতাব লাভ করেছেন। স্থানীয় কমিউনিটি রিলেশনের লক্ষে কাজ করার জন্য ব্রিটেনের রানী তাঁকে এ খেতাবে প্রদান করেন। ১৯৬২ সালে ব্রিটেনে আসার পর আজও করে যাচ্ছেন। বাংলাদেশের মৌলভীবাজার জেলার বালিকান্দি গ্রাম আজিজুল ইসলামের আদি বাড়ি। তাঁর পিতার নাম মরহুম আলহাজ্ব সৈয়দ খলিলুর রহমান ও মায়ের নাম সৈয়দা আখতারুন্নেসা খাতুন। সৈয়দ আজিজুল ইসলাম মৌলভীবাজার সরকারী কলেজ থেকে আইএ পাস করেন এবং ১৯৬০ সালে ঢাকা কলেজ থেকে বিএ পাস করার পর তৎকালীন পশ্চিম পাকিস্তানের করাচিকে মিনিষ্ট্রি অব রিহাবিলিটেশন এবং সেটেলমেন্টে চাকুরী শুরু করেন। সেখানে দুই বছর চাকুরী করার পর ১৯৬২ সালে লন্ডনে চলে আসেন। লন্ডনে আসার পর তিনি ইন্ডাস্ট্রিয়াল ম্যানেজমেন্টের উপর কোর্স করেন।

চাকুরী শুরু করেন ফিলিপস ইলেকট্রিক। এরপর ট্রাস্ট হাউজ



ফোর্ট, উইনগেট ও জনস্টন কোম্পানীতে চাকুরী করেন। ১৯৬৮ সালে ইন্দোপাক ফ্রেন্ডশীপ সোসাইটি গঠন করে কমিউনিটির উন্নয়নে কাজ শুরু করেন। কিন্তু ১৯৬৭ সালে বাংলাদেশে ফিরে যান। বাংলাদেশে যাওয়ার পর একটি জার্মান কোম্পানীতে চাকুরী শুরু করেন। ১৯৬৯ সালে

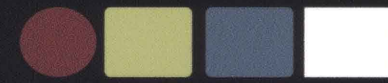
নারায়ণগঞ্জের পোস্টাল সুপারিনটেন্ডেন্ট আজাদুল হক চৌধুরীর মেয়ে লুৎফা চৌধুরীর সাথে বিয়ে বন্ধনে আবদ্ধ হন। ১৯৭১ সালে আবার তিনি লন্ডনে ফিরে আসেন। ফিরে এসে কমন্ওয়েলথ অর্গানাইজেশনে ফাইন্যান্স অফিসার হিসেবে চাকুরী নেন। এ সময় তিনি অনুভব করেন ব্রিটেনের স্থানীয় সরকারে বাংলাদেশীদের কোন প্রতিনিধি নেই। আর এ অনুভব থেকেই তিনি ব্রিটেনের স্থানীয় রাজনীতিতে জড়িয়ে পড়েন। রাজনীতির সুবিধার জন্য কমন্ওয়েলথের চাকুরি ছেড়ে জিএলসি'তে চাকুরি নেন। এর পাশাপাশি পুণরায় শুরু করেন সমাজকর্ম। বর্ণবৈষম্য দূরীকরণেও অব্যাহতভাবে কাজ চালিয়ে যান। এ কারণে তিনি বিভিন্ন সংগঠনের সাথে কাজ করেন। ১৯৮৩ সালে লিবারেল ডেমোক্রেট পার্টিতে যোগদান করেন এবং এ বছরই সাধারণ নির্বাচনে স্টেপনী ও বো এলাকা থেকে নির্বাচন করে সাত হাজারের বেশি ভোট পান।



Images Biti Das // Redwan Chowdhury - Camde to UK (Camden) in 1968. d.2002 // Amin foodstore in Drummond Street. Halal and Bangladeshi vegetable shops started to open around Camden in the 80's

Life //

Life in the UK // 1950 - 1980



50s

Shamsuddin Ahmed - Drinking tea in cafes and buying paan in Euston Road

"I used to cook for myself on days off, or there was a Halal restaurant in Aldgate, so I would eat there, it was cheap, like twenty pence or even fifteen pence. I used to eat a meat dish, because I used to eat vegetables in the restaurant, I didn't cook fish, it was too hard...I didn't eat rice, I ate chapattis, chapattis were very popular amongst the customers too, because we didn't have Naans in those days, so the only breads on offer were chapattis and parathas. I used to get paid ten pounds and I only needed twenty pence daily. Ten pence bus fare five to get to work and five to get back. I always made sure I ate halal food, I would drink tea, but in those days everybody drank tea in cafés. Do you know because there were no fridges in our homes the factory people would drink sterilised milk, they came in long bottle, with a bottle top made of metal, you know like Coca-Cola bottle tops. It wouldn't go off as quickly as normal milk, but I couldn't drink my tea with sterilised milk, it tasted and smelled awful. I couldn't drink it with condensed milk either. ...I didn't go to the pictures like the other men, I would take my clothes to the laundry it would cost fifty pence for all my laundry. It wasn't necessary when I was working in the kitchen, but when I was a waiter, I needed to have clean clothes to work front of house. I would go out to buy a new shirt if I had missed the laundry, people would tease me about the number of shirts I had collected. In restaurants you have plenty of time, because you are closed in the morning and the afternoon, so you don't have anything to do in that time, many sleep, but I used to pray, and rest, sometimes I would go home. I used to come to the Euston Road to buy Paan for my cousin who ate paan. Paan arrived here in 1960, or in 1958, Patak's started selling it, he used to have a shop there selling spices and sweets, he became a millionaire with his spices and pickles, his is an amazing story."

60s

Kolomdar Ali – No indoor toilets, public bath and no fish to eat

"The toilets were outside and we would go to public baths on Saturdays. That place had four bedrooms with thirteen or fourteen people living there. There was one double bed and two single beds in the same room, so that was four people in that room...three or four in the other rooms and some in the living room. We would cook for ourselves. We used to order chickens from the farm nearby... a really big chicken, it would fill the pot...there was no fish, not many ate fish back then."

70s

Sajjat Miah – going to a school at the age of 12 in 1972 and working after school...

"I went to a school. In those days there weren't many Bengalis in UK. There weren't many accommodations for Bangladeshis. We struggled to find accommodation so many people used to live in one place. I used to go to school from 8-3.30 and then I used to work at the restaurant until 12. I went to a school in East Molesey, Surrey. Everyone was white. I had no problem. I only studied for 9 months. It was really good. I had to go to school by law. I went to secondary school. My cousin worked in one of his relative's restaurant, so I used to work there in the evening while went to school in the morning. I really liked my school. They were really nice. I experienced no racism. I had to leave after 9 months as the owner of the restaurant decided to sell the restaurant."

Siddek Miah - Fights in Drummond Street...

"Yes there were problems with the English. Well you know the glass milk bottles that the milkman used to deliver milk in and collect back again?... well there would be whole crates of bottles waiting to be collected and there used to be a space between Robert Street and Drummond Street and people would use the bottles as missiles and White youths and Bengali Youths would throw these bottles at each other. I also got involved...I was young then."



Images (Left to right top to bottom) Mashahid Ali Cowdhury in London, c.1959 // Siddique Khan Choudhury and Mr Choudhury (d.1977) visitng Brighton from East Pakistan. c.1966 // A M M Asyad. Photo taken in early '60s. d.1974 // Mokhlesur Rahman c1960's



Life //

First Generation Women // Living in the UK



60s and 70s

Bani Begum Motin - Going to fabric shops to buy materials for sarees ...

"...[When we first came] there were no Asian shops, you couldn't get the vegetables from back home like you can now, you know the rolls of material, we would buy 6 yards from those rolls and wear them as Sarees . And the cold, we used to wear two pairs of socks with boots and we used to dry them near the heater. I would [also] wear trousers; my husband really liked me to wear trousers. I have kept some but I gave away most of them to Oxfam after he died. I don't wear them after he died."

Mobura Banu – Bringing vegetables and fish (dried) in suitcases from Bangladesh...

"...[In those days] we couldn't get Paan (green leaf chewed with betel nuts), we couldn't get fish or any Bengali vegetables. People used to bring them from Bangladesh; they would bring them in suitcases amongst their clothes. Now you can buy everything here. [But] I liked it very much. I wanted to come as my brother was here. We lived in my brother's house in Wimbledon, then we got a place in Warren street. He [husband] had a restaurant in Baker Street, he also had one in St Albans and Farnborough. We had two bedrooms and a bathroom and kitchen...There used to be another family below our flat and I used to go out with the wife of our neighbour...to the shops... once I became a widow my children took me places like the Mela (festivals)."

Shomirun Khatun – Finding no place to stay

"When I came here I struggled really badly. We didn't have anywhere to stay; we had to stay in someone else's house. We didn't have good food either; we ate lots of aloo baji (dry potato curry) , kobi baji (dry cabbage baji), potato with meat, we cooked whatever they (husband and brother in law) brought home, and it was hard to find any fish or vegetables that we were used to... if they didn't bring anything we ate lentils. He (husband) used to earn a little money, not like now where they earn so much more, he only earned enough just to live on and feed the children. He also sent some money back to the relatives back home."

80's

Mrs R Begum – Raising children alone and not being allowed to learn English

"When my daughter was born and this time it was even more difficult because when I was pregnant with her, I had to carry my son, I had to feed him and do everything else. ...I used to take them to the park and the library. I used borrow books and read to them. Then I became a member of the Surma Centre (BWA)... I used to learn English but my husband didn't like it very much. After few lessons, my husband said to me " I didn't bring you to this country to learn English." I used to think what is he talking about? We are here, we should learn English and at the same time he used to expect me to be independent and used to tell me off for not being able to communicate on my own. In the beginning I never used to say anything. I used to be scared of him, so I did whatever he told me. So I used to go to Surma centre without him knowing, I also used to go to Working Men's college. I used to drop my children off to school and then visit the college. My husband eventually found out but didn't say anything. So I began learning English which allowed me to read to my children. I did a lot even though I didn't understand English. And then slowly more and more women started coming to Surma Centre. ...My children didn't get educated and that hurts, sometimes I blame myself, but sometimes I think I did my best. I do feel my husband preventing me from meeting good people, going to good places has prevented me from going forward. I wanted to meet people from other countries, cultures. I understand we are Bengali but love learning new things, good things, but my husband wanted me to stay home, cook and clean. I can't stay home, it makes me depressed. I can make friends really easily. But my husband never liked it... but now he regrets it."

Images: Bani Begum // Sabequa Chowdhury (on the right) c. 1963 // Bani Begum Motin - used to go to Westminster with this mini bus to collect the ladies for their English Classes.



Women //

Abdul Momen // Working with the Bengali Community



“

Radical community work can produce a lot of change. It can transform the community and I think that is what has happened in Camden. The work that we did in Camden with the Bangladeshi community has produced a lot of results in relation to life chances of younger people and in relation to women and the elders. ...I make a clear distinction between change and transformation. Transformation is a total change of a situation. Ordinary change is when you tinker with little things but you don't bring about a change in the society in the community, in the people life chances etc in a transformational way, whereas transformation change is absolute total change...

”



Picture of Abdul Momen

The launch of Bengali Workers' Action Group...

In 1971 I applied for a job in Camden committee community relations as Asian Community worker. They weren't Bangladeshi, there were lot of single Bengalis and their families started to arrive. When I got the job as Asian Community Worker, the first thing I did was to take a tour of the areas where the Asians lived. I focused on area around Kings Cross, Fitzrovia and Camden Town. I also to a lesser extent focused on areas in Swiss cottage and Kilburn. I didn't need to take much time to identify the needs of the community. I was able to establish a link with the Bangladeshi community very quickly. Due to the language barriers the Bangladeshis were finding it difficult to use the services. I set up, in conjunction with the Housing Aid Centre, an advice session on Fridays which was inundated with people with all kinds of issues such as immigration, accommodation – a whole range of issues. That marked the beginning of my work. I started work in September 1975 and by February in 1976 I was able to establish Bengali Workers Action Group. Meanwhile I did all kinds of groundwork. I very much believed in working with other organisations. I worked closely with a community worker based in social services area 1 which was around Holborn and Kings cross. This was my first approach to networking in the professional world and this led to building relationship with other mainstream agencies such as the social services and youth services. I also used to work closely with this Save the Children Fund worker, and together we appointed a Bangladeshi woman and started a women's group at the Hopscotch centre. Soon after I was appointed we also recruited a Bangladeshi woman (Hashpotara Begum) who had masters qualification in Health and Nutrition; with her and in parallel with the Bengali workers action group which was mainly men, I helped set up 3 women's projects around Camden.

The Issues faced by the community in Camden... Immigration Raid

“There were these immigration officers but we used to call them immigration raids, and there were these houses in Drummond Street, and off Drummond street there were 2 houses and the immigration officers used to come and raid the houses in the middle of the night and arrest all of them in the house. Illegal immigrants they would call them. Then they would be detained in the police station and then to my knowledge and everyone was released as they couldn't find anything. So this kind of racial harassment used to take place frequently.”

Racist Attacks on children

“...families were just arriving, and the children would be living mostly in Kings Cross, Drummond Street, Regents Park and that kind of areas. They used to go to this school Sir Williams Collins School now I think it has a different name, it is in Somers Town. So I had this colleague who visited Bangladesh to learn about the Bangladeshi community and created a teaching resource for LEA called Bangladeshi community in Camden. We would go to Sir Williams School to complain about the Bangladeshi pupils not being able to come as they get beaten up on their way to school and therefore feeling very scared. I had one interesting meeting with the Deputy Head, who was a card carrying member of the communist party and he said, “What do you expect in a capitalist society? Unless the proletariat come into power, there is no hope.” I said, “How long do we wait?” In those days the schools wouldn't take much notice and it was a problem. But from my community work point of view we have achieved a lot because of our ability to network with the right kinds of people and we formed a very good relationship with the police as I worked very closely with the superintendent although cannot remember his name and formed a police liaison subcommittee.”

Racist attacks on Bengali houses

“There were new council flats being built in the Somers Town area. The newly- arrived Bangladeshi families found it very difficult due to the racist attacks. There were cases where a house would be allocated to a Bengali family but before they had moved into their home, the windows would be smashed and broken into. Sometimes the social workers would help them, but it was an enormous problem. I used to visit these families a lot. I managed to develop really good relations with the police superintendent, and he sometimes would come with me.”

Occupation 1984

“One day [in 1984] I went to visit a family in a hotel. It was around 10 or 11 am. In the reception there was this young Bangladeshi woman with 2 little children aged around 4-6... The husband was a restaurant worker and therefore would leave very early and come very late. So she was very lonely and unsupported. So the following day in the evening I was at someone's birthday party. One of my colleagues called Liz rang me while at the party and asked me if I was aware of what had happened to the family I had visited yesterday. She informed me that they had been burned to death.”

“I told Liz organise a picket and my community work team to contact all the families in all the hotels to gather in front of Camden council. I couldn't go there as I had a lecture but informed Liz I will get there as soon as I finish the lecture. When I went in, I heard the chair of the housing committee saying, “We are very sorry about this tragic event and we have listened to you and we understand what needs to be done and I am assuring you that we will do our very best to help you and our sympathies are with the family...but unfortunately we can't arrange anything immediately. People will have to wait.” ...I don't know what happened before but I said something that looking back, I should have phrased differently. I said “I have heard what you are saying but I don't agree with that and I have just one question which is: why is it that a Bangladeshi family had to die? He got very angry and he said “Are you calling us racist?” I asked, “Did I use the word racist at all? I believe a lot of injustice has been done and if you took enough precaution to ensure health and safety I don't think this would have happened...” So we argued for a bit and then I said, “Well anyway if (by) today - this evening, now - you don't organise safe housing for all these homeless people... and there were many – not everyone came, about 3 were white and rest were Bengali... then we will not be leaving this town hall. So we stayed there. We stayed there for a month...”

You can find out more about Abdul Momen on our website www.bwa-surma.org

Community //

Here & There // Stories of British Bangladeshis in Camden



Joban Ali

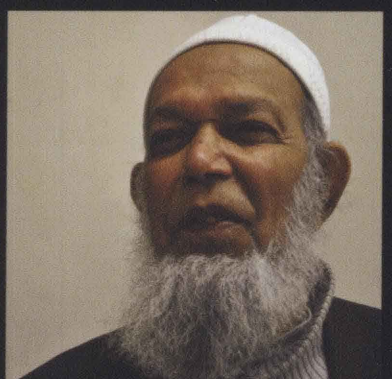
"[I am] over 100 years old. I can't remember for sure. I'd tell you the date of birth stated on my passport if I remembered that too. I had no intention of coming here. Only Allah can tell you. My father asked me to take care of my brothers. This is when I became bound to help my family. My father said to me "I don't know what will happen to you but I pray for you". I said how I can support them... I sat and started thinking about what my father had said... I came here in the 50's..."

D.O.B: 12.04.1922



Kazi Shamsuddin Ahmed

"I was born in 1930, 12th of October in Bangladesh, Maulwibazar, Kholipurinum, Mubarakpur. My father died in 1945, I was a student in class 7, back then class 7 was very hard. I came here in 1957, when I first arrived I stayed in Brick Lane, and then I came to King's Cross."

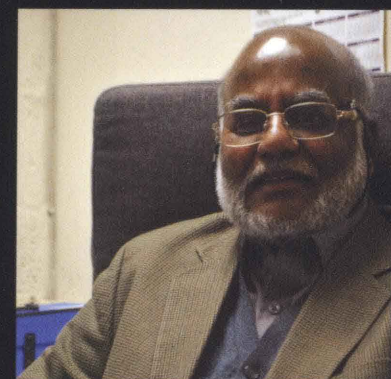


Syed Azizul Islam MBE

"I was born in the year 1941 in a village called Balikandir district of Maulvibazar. I finished my secondary education in 1956. I used to do a lot of drama when I was young. I am from a culturally rich town. I graduated from Dhaka University in 1961. I worked in Karachi for 1 and a half year and then moved to UK to study. When I came here I stayed in 51 Marchmont Street, not far from Russel Square. I spent a lot of time translating and writing letters for the local Bengali community as they could not speak English. I worked at GLC and lobbied for more support for the Sylhety community by Sylheties. Throughout my life I found that nobody gives you anything unless you get involved..."

Syed Azizul Islam (known as nana 'grand dad' in BWA) was awarded an MBE in recognition for his contribution in Community Work in 2005.

D.O.B: 22.08.1938



Biti Das

"I was born 1938, 13th of October. Now I am 72 years old. And my childhood was in Calcutta, where I was born. My husband brought me here in 1967. My husband passed away where he was very young and left me with a child. I had to get 2 jobs to ensure a good future for my daughter. I am now a traveler and a poet."



Amina Begum

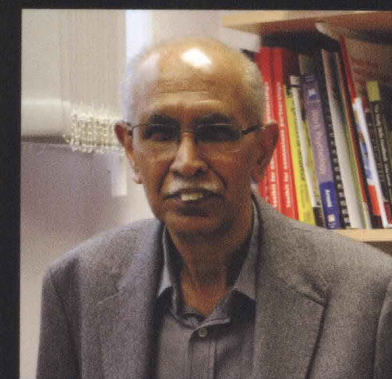
"I am 67 years old. I don't exactly remember when I came, but it's about 20-21 years. I brought my two sons and daughter with me. Two of my daughters were born in the UK. I struggled a lot in my life but now I am happy. We used to live in Turnpike lane, after that we moved to Kings Cross and then to Belsize park. My husband and I are now pensioners. I come to Surma Centre as much as I can... if it wasn't for the services offered here, I would be in a wheelchair now..."

D.O.B: 05.03.1940



Abdul Momen

"I was born about 30 miles from Calcutta in West Bengal in 1938. When the Partition took place in 1947, my father opted to go to East Pakistan which is now Bangladesh. I went to schools in Khulna, Jashore, and Kushtia. I completed my masters' degree in English Literature at Rajshahi University. I worked in various institutions in Bangladesh including as a Senior lecturer at Chittagong University and then I came to Leeds University as I was offered a scholarship to do Doctorate in English literature. While in Leeds, I have been involved in freedom movement in Bangladesh which was my first taste of community development. In 1975 while working in Camden as a Community Worker I helped set up Bengali Workers' Action Group which is now known as Bengali Workers' Association. The work that we did in Camden with the Bangladeshi community has produced a lot of results in relation to life chances of younger people and in relation to women and the elders."



Begum Shaheda Choudhury

I was born in AushKnadi Bethapur Nowbiganj, on the 13 of April 1945, my mother died when I was very young, so I didn't know my mother growing up. My father arranged my marriage on the 23rd of June 1966. I went to live in his village and 1968 my first daughter was born in January. We came to this country in the 80's"



Khayrun Ali

"I was born in 1967, We lived in the main town, Sylhet. I came here in 1992... leaving all my close relatives behind, also the country looked completely different. It was a strange land, very somber, completely different from Bangladesh, which was fun and colourful."

D.O.B: 09.10.1967



Zolika Bibi

"When we were little my mother died, we were three siblings, one of my paternal aunties took me in, she didn't have any daughters so she took me after my mother died she wanted to bring me up, but when I was about 10, my father took me back, he said that he needed me to cook for him and my brothers, as he would be working the fields and could not cook for himself... my father got a proposal for my marriage, it was a widower who had young children and they thought I would understand because I had also lost my mother at a young age, so my father agreed to the marriage. I was only 12 at the time. I am not sure when I came to UK."



Hashpot Ullah

"My date of birth is 11th October 1944. I was born in Noakhali, Bangladesh. My father was in the British Army during the 2nd World War, my father fought for the British in Basra in Iraq. I thought there was work available here in London and that's how I got here. We used to live in Warren Street. I came here in '68."



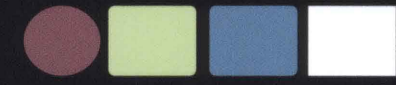
Mohammed Mashuk Miah

My village is Maulvibazar, Gondiri gram, I was born on the 15 on May 1963. My father tried to get me educated, because I was the eldest child of the family, I took the exam in 1979 and again in 1980, but it was beyond me. I married and came to UK in 1997."



Participants //

Here & There // Stories of British Bangladeshis in Camden



Mobura Banu

"Date of birth is 12 February 1930. My father's village was in Uttermowlain, Maulvibazar; my husband was from Goruwa, Siranpur. I have many stories... sad stories and also happy ones. I was married at 12, I married my cousin; He left me pregnant and did not return to Bangladesh for twelve years...he returned about six times and I had six children. My husband used to live in Calcutta, and then he came to London. He died 15 years ago. I came to the UK when all my children were small. I can't remember the date. [In those days] we couldn't get Paan (green leaf chewed with betel nuts), we couldn't get fish or any Bengali vegetables. People used to bring them from Bangladesh; they would bring them in suitcases amongst their clothes. Now you can buy everything here."



Councillor Nasim Ali

"My date of birth is 7th February 1969. I was born in a village that used to be called Ramkrishnapur – now it's called Islampur – in Sylhet, Bangladesh. I came to the UK with my parents in 1976. My first childhood memory... I suppose I don't have many memories of Bangladesh, as I came here [to the UK] when I was seven. My first memories were from here, going to school and crying on my way home because I'd thought they were going to leave me there for good. So I suppose that was my first childhood memory... Camden was a different place because there weren't as many people from diverse backgrounds, so I remember especially in the late seventies and early eighties when there were all the skinheads and the National Front.... I set up the Camden United Project in 1995, which was a project that helped bring young people together, using football as a tool... in 1998, winning the Camden Good Citizen Award... opened up doors for me to join the council..."



Mrs Bani Begum

"I was born on 15th April 1940, [I am] from Chittagong, but my husband is from Sylhet, Maulvibazar. I have memories of going to school, getting married, moving to Sylhet to my in-laws home, forging a life with my husband in Britain. We lived in the town with my dad. He used to work at the Post Office. We are five siblings, all still alive, my parents are no longer alive. The place we lived was called Ralljaanthana. I came to UK in 1964..."



Shahera Begum

"I was born in Bangladesh on the 10th March 1956 in Fessuganj. We used to run around, play Kabadi and Kofti... in the fields during lunch and after lunch. My father was an engineer in India and that's where I grew up, in Assam. I was the second wife and therefore I couldn't come to UK... I sent my children to UK in '94 but I drove myself crazy worrying about whether they were being looked after, whether they were getting food and clothing, I came to UK in 1999."



Amina Kayyum

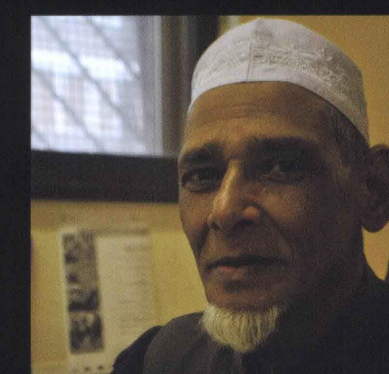
I was born in Sylhet, Bangladesh. I came to England in 1982... I was thirteen years old, and we stayed in Surrey, where we were the only non- white family staying there. ...I was feeling kind of suffocated, because there were no other Asians living there. And when I went out of my home area, I discovered dance, and I discovered more black people and more Indian people... so it was really exciting for me to be out there, and I really felt comfortable being around that area, which was in Croydon. And there was someone teaching dance there, and I had always wanted to (learn). I have no idea where it came from, perhaps when I was very young in Bangladesh, there was a girl who did kathak, I saw the dance here, and I must say I didn't go in to become a professional, I just went there because I was interested in it, and I just haven't looked back really. I made my debut performance in 2001.



Yowar Miah

I was born in Maulvibazar. I came to UK in the early '60s. Initially we thought there are lots of work here but when we came, we realized we were wrong. We would not get paid very much at all, for those of us who were not literate would get something like £5 a week. I worked mainly in restaurants. I am now 70 and I feel because of the hard work that we did, our children are able to get an education and get good jobs..."

D.O.B: 30.07.2011



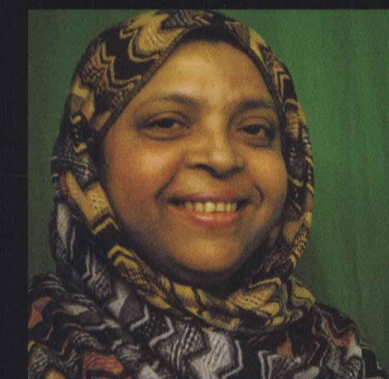
Sheba Khanom

"I was born here in Camden, in the Royal Free Hospital, I have seven siblings. My dad brought us girls to be independent and study but I never managed to complete my studies. I have 5 children and been married fourteen years. Once my youngest child is a bit older, I wish to complete a degree and become a speech and language therapist."



Rina Begum

"I was born in 1962. My village is in Maulvibazar. The village is called BoroKapon. After that I got married in 1979 to my cousin from my dad's side, I came to London in 1985. I am the youngest. My dad and his brothers' families all used to live together. So me, my brother and my cousin brother (who is my husband's younger brother) used to be together all the time. I feel like my life in the olden days was so much better... we used to jump into the ponds together and go swimming... I used to stay in the pond for a long time especially during summer. I used to get mud all over me which was really fun. The ponds were really close to our houses."



Participants //