



VISIONARIES: A SOUTH ASIAN ARTS AND AGEING COUNTER NARRATIVE

by Arti Prashar OBE and Elizabeth Lynch MBE

FOREWORD

One of my early jobs in heritage was at the South Asian Diaspora Literature and Arts Archive (SALIDAA since renamed SADAA <https://sadaa.co.uk/>). The pioneering digital archive was established by a group of formidable older South Asian women creatives including the literary critic Ranjana Ash (who was then in her eighties) to find and preserve the manuscripts, costumes, album covers and musical scores of twentieth century British Asian culture.

Now as the Director of a major cultural institution in one of England's super-diverse cities, I welcome CADA's commitment to bringing the widest range of voices and perspectives into the field of creative ageing. While Birmingham is the youngest city in Europe, with over 40% of the population under 25, England as a whole, like many countries across the globe is an ageing society. Embracing the diversity of older people is crucial, if arts and heritage organisations are to achieve their ambitions to be culturally inclusive and relevant.

Having spent much of my career working in learning and engagement, I understand the value of creative activity and its contribution to individual wellbeing and community building. I also recognise the need to acknowledge the contribution of professional artists from a wide range of backgrounds to our understanding of the world. This report explores these two important aspects of creative ageing in our ethnically diverse society. Firstly, it documents the experiences and aspirations of older South Asian artists many of whom, as first generation immigrants, were pioneers and secondly, it highlights examples of South Asian led arts and heritage projects from across England, drawing out important learnings.

This report is just the beginning of CADA's journey building relationships with older people from global majority communities and those that work with and for them. I look forward to seeing how this work progresses and the recommendations are used to deliver the change we want to see.

Creative ageing is about the quality of everyone's later lives and all our futures.

Sara Wajid
Joint CEO Birmingham Museums Trust

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INTRODUCTION

This research was commissioned by CADA, the Creative Ageing Development Agency.

CADA, which began its work in 2020, exists to champion the value of creativity, curiosity and imagination in later life and believes that we all have a right to create and take an active part in cultural life at any age. As the national development agency for creative ageing in England, CADA celebrates the cultural and creative contribution of older people, challenging ageism, leading a fundamental rethink and reflection on ageing and creativity and harnessing collective energy for change.

As we adjust to becoming an ageing society, CADA investigates the profound shifts needed to tackle ageism and support systemic change, acting as a powerful advocate to funders and policy makers. CADA recognises and respects the wealth of cultural traditions across all of our diverse communities and understands that everyone ages differently. This range of life experiences enriches our arts and heritage. Our definition of creative ageing stretches from active older professional artists to people who are discovering creative activity for the first time in later life.

CADA came into existence with the support of the Baring Foundation, which invested in a decade of creative ageing across the UK and highlighted international good practice in the field during the 2010s. In the conclusion of the Baring Foundation's report [On Diversity and Creative Ageing](#)¹, having explored a range of work by and for people with protected characteristics, it stated that 'the greatest area for development was in the field of cultural diversity'.

It is widely recognised that in the UK, older ethnically diverse people are among the most excluded groups in society due to accumulated experiences of discrimination and disadvantage (Stopforth, 2021). During the pandemic, the loss of support from informal community social spaces and exclusion caused by lack of digital access and language barriers has been significant.



IT BOTH RECORDS THE EXPERIENCES OF INDIVIDUAL OLDER SOUTH ASIAN ARTISTS AND PROVIDES A SNAPSHOT OF RECENT PROJECTS BY, WITH AND FOR SOUTH ASIAN PEOPLE IN A RANGE OF CONTEXTS AND SETTINGS.

¹ <https://baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/on-diversity-and-creative-ageing/>



Detail from *Remembering a Brave New World*,
by Chila Kumari Singh Burman Tate Winter
Commission 2020 Image: Elizabeth Lynch

This piece of scoping work, commissioned from Arti Prashar OBE and Elizabeth Lynch MBE, is an important step for CADA's development of an inclusive approach to creative ageing. This report celebrates the work of visionary people drawn from a diverse range of South Asian identities and experiences. It both records the experiences of individual older South Asian artists and provides a snapshot of recent projects by, with and for South Asian people in a range of contexts and settings. Within this report there is learning to share, not only about working with diaspora communities, but also how the holistic approach to outreach, arts and well-being could benefit practice with all communities.

CADA sees this report as a starting point for a range of actions and responses that will bring new voices and a wider range of perspectives to creative ageing practice. The recommendations highlight the need for more recognition of South Asian artists and South Asian cultural organisations and their contribution to the country's cultural life, the importance of South Asian led projects and programmes in reaching older South Asian audiences and more opportunities to share knowledge and expertise and connect with others working in the field. In response, CADA will:

Facilitate a networking event to bring together visionary older artists and the visionary arts, heritage and community organisations who contributed to this research to explore and discuss practical ways for connection, build 'conversations that matter' with each other and with the creative ageing sector, the wider arts and heritage sector and funders.

Use the findings from the report to highlight the creative ageing work by, with and for South Asian communities and the work of older South Asian artists with national organisations concerned with culture, health and wellbeing and create the climate to make connection happen, bring new voices into national conversations and increase access to existing networks and training.

Promote existing research and guidelines on working with older people from marginalised communities, enabling artists and organisations to benefit from both arts and community development work done to date.

Undertaking this work in 2021 and with limited resources was a challenge, as the pandemic continued to impact on all our lives. CADA is grateful to everyone who made the time to contribute their experiences and ideas to this piece of work. Thanks are also due to the researchers Arti Prashar and Elizabeth Lynch, whose existing knowledge, experience, contacts and tenacity made this important piece of work possible at such a difficult time. CADA is looking forward to connecting with people whose stories are recorded here and working with partners towards a more inclusive creative ageing sector.

Dr. Virginia Tandy OBE
Director
CADA: the Creative Ageing
Development Agency

Researchers and context:

The small scope and concise focus for this research project reflects the available resource. It was undertaken June – November 2021 by independent researchers Arti Prashar and Elizabeth Lynch. They were able to use their personal and professional networks to identify artists, community organisations and arts professionals to take part in surveys, interviews and questionnaires and to visit some events in person and online.

The impact of the pandemic during this period of time continued to be experienced by communities, arts and cultural organisations and projects. This made contacting some people, projects and organisations a further challenge. Given these difficult circumstances the researchers were delighted by the response to their enquiries and grateful to all those who made the time to participate and hope that their reflections and ideas resonate widely with other diaspora artists and organisations.

Arti Prashar OBE is at the forefront of sensory theatre for learning disabled people and people living with dementias. She is a commissioned artist for Culture Box, and has recently acted as dramaturg for Oily Cart Theatre's *Space to Be*. She lectures on Rose Bruford's Collaborative Theatre Making MA/MFA course.

Arti stepped down as Spare Tyre's Artistic Director/CEO in 2019 after 19 years of inspirational and acclaimed leadership nurturing and enabling diverse associate artists from a range of art forms by offering many paid internships before it was fashionable. She is a Trustee of Creative Youth and EFDSS, she advises CADA, and is an active member of What Next? Wandsworth. She is a Churchill, Birkbeck and RSA Fellow.

Elizabeth Lynch MBE works with artists, communities and organisations as an advisor and researcher to create and support ambitious cultural programmes. Her experience lies in collaborating with and commissioning artists in community contexts and in producing interdisciplinary projects across art, science, health and education.

After running several youth arts projects, Elizabeth established the ground breaking youth-led Roundhouse Studios as Director 2000-8 and now works for arts organisations, museums and heritage organisations including Creative People & Places projects, Wellcome Trust, Action Space, Arts Catalyst, Museum of the Home and the National Trust. She has worked as a theatre director in India and Pakistan and on the UK/India *Silk River* programme 2017 in West Bengal. She is Chair of Theatre-Rites and What Next? Wandsworth, RSA Fellow and Associate Research Fellow, School of Arts, Birkbeck University.

NOTE FROM AUTHORS

We do not claim to be impartial about this research. We believe our knowledge, interest in and experience of working with artists and communities means that between us we can understand those parts of South Asian artistic practice and community arts practices not always visible to dominant systems of cultural meaning. We are older practitioners ourselves and we want to see work by, with and for older people in all communities thrive. Our aim has been to foreground the voices of the artists, group leaders, heritage workers and participants we have spoken to and to present what they think is important. Sometimes certain themes emerge that many are agreed on. We have also included unique observations by individuals because they bring interesting perspectives and ideas to the narrative.



NOTE TO READERS

- Quotes from written sources are *in italics*
- Verbatim quotes by interviewees are highlighted in blue
- The quotes by the artists from the survey and interviews are unattributed
- Quotes in the Six Stories are attributed where permission has been granted
- Permission has been granted for attributed verbatim quotes
- South Asian – We have used 'South Asian' as a collective term for the diaspora communities and have been specific about cultural heritage and identity wherever possible
- Research questions and methodology details are included in Appendix 1.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

VISIONARIES: A SOUTH ASIAN ARTS AND AGEING COUNTER NARRATIVE

The arts are a gateway to our collective humanity and ethnically diverse communities need a parity of esteem in the cultural landscape. Visionary Artist

When planning this research into creative ageing we felt strongly that in addition to looking at good participatory practice in community settings we should also capture the experiences of the generations of professional artists who came to this country across five decades, from the 1950s to the 2000s.

These artists are pioneering, inspiring examples of creativity, curiosity and imagination in later life. Many of them are already engaged in making work with and for older audiences and participants and as this research illuminates, they make a unique and essential contribution to older South Asian diaspora communities. The creative work of the artists who took part in this research is varied, with influences from western European, South Asian and East African training and traditions.

Classical, folk, popular, devotional and experimental forms are represented and there is an abundance of multi-art form practice in our sample. In addition, as artists who are immigrants, displaced people or refugees, their distinctive experiences and perspectives need to be acknowledged and included as we all continue to explore and reflect on the cultural and creative contribution of older people.

The community organisations and individuals who contribute to the six stories are led by women and men with a real sense of purpose. It was powerful to hear how they are motivated

by service to their own diaspora communities and by a strong sense of cultural justice. Through making work that challenges stereotypes about experiences and creative expression, all the organisations are consciously facing outwards, working with mainstream partners to ensure that their legacy becomes part of collections, archives and programming.

Their cultural heritage is a source of pride and they are acutely aware of the importance of capturing the stories of those pioneering elders who came to the UK between the 1950s and 1970s. It was exciting to have confirmed that there are many artists within the membership of the groups we worked with and more who have been identified through their projects, ranging in their practice across folk and devotional art forms to contemporary and classical work.

We feel that the findings are energising, propelling us forward into our later decades, inspired by people who continue to engage thoughtfully, critically with the world around them. Despite frustrations, there is optimism, there are achievements to celebrate and battles still to win, but that is why these generations are visionaries.

Arti Prashar and Elizabeth Lynch

The key findings of our research with the artists and the community organisations and projects are summarised below.

The following themes resonate across both sets of findings:

1. An attitude to ageing itself that is empathetic, inclusive and caring and acknowledges wider societal ageism
2. That people can continue to learn and be stretched through creative practices is demonstrated across both sets of testimonies
3. Agreement that participating in arts activity can bring physical and mental health benefits
4. The arts have low status in some sections of South Asian communities. This can be due to reasons of faith, economic value and perceptions of social status.
5. As within wider society, it is also recognised that art can generate conversations about difficult or taboo subjects that affect their communities
6. The importance of cultural and social heritage that embraces the story of the diaspora in England and its legacy

7. Limited perceptions of South Asian artistic practice and community arts practices need to be made visible to dominant systems of cultural meaning that inform discourse, practice and content in our cultural institutions
8. The importance of programming work that can resonate with South Asian communities, especially if they are not currently attending these spaces
9. Programming ambitious South Asian arts and culture can attract audiences from all cultural backgrounds and connect older people with a shared history of place, work and community

In addition the artists clearly articulate:

10. The desire for a better infrastructure within mainstream and the South Asian arts sector itself to address organisational memory so that late style expression is supported, invigorated and continues to evolve as well as encouraging those that follow.

Through the 6 Stories it is highlighted that

11. Artists can emerge at a later stage in life, their creative interests having been discouraged in their youth, aspirations hijacked by life experiences, lack of money or simply never having had the opportunity to learn skills and develop artistic expression.

33 VISIONARY ARTISTS 55+

“WHERE WE’RE AT”

[Chila Kumari Singh Burman] admits she is ‘a little bit’ pissed off fame has been slow to arrive, when she has been working as an artist for so long.

‘That’s why we talk about systemic racism. That’s why we talk about anti-feminism. Why has it taken the Tate so long to commission me? Well, not just them... I had a lot of shows in the 1980s and 1990s because the art world recognised black and Asian artists then. Then all of a sudden it was like that was it. It was almost like some of the galleries were saying, “Well, we’ve done you all.” So we all went off and did our own things.’

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW FOR EVENING STANDARD BY ANNA VAN PRAAGH 4.10.21¹

<https://www.standard.co.uk/insider/chila-kumari-burman-artist-covent-garden-tiger-b958067.html>

These findings are drawn from questionnaires and conversations with thirty-three artists of South Asian origin.

1.1 Visibility and representation

Older artists want to have: greater agency in the arts sector; better recognition; for their experience to be valued; more representation in public art collections, galleries, museums and archives and on conference platforms and juries. They want to see systemic change at senior leadership level in the arts sector and in funding bodies and to have South Asian artistic work included in school and higher education curricula.

There needs to be a greater presence in national collections of contemporary South Asian art works, we need to be able to walk into any of our museums and galleries and see such work at any time, not just on special occasions.

People need to be able to speak about their art, what uniquely inspires and moves them – not just about diversity and representation

Commissioning and programming intergenerational work is valuable, especially now while older diaspora generations are living, to carry forward the story of South Asian arts and activism, to share knowledge and promote discourse about what has gone before, and to inform new work.

1.2 Connection, professional development, solidarity

The artists signalled the need for better networks and more opportunities to meet and share practice, skills and ideas. There was a call for better sharing of resources and physical space by publicly funded organisations, and more programming of inclusive, diverse community arts projects.

Mentoring for both older and younger artists is a want and a need, with many of the artists already engaged with supporting both peers and emerging artists. They recognise the importance of having an online presence when digital platforms are becoming more influential and relevant to conveying messages and narratives.

Navigating England's arts sector is perceived as a challenge. There are some who are also disappointed by what they see as the replication of mainstream hierarchies within the diaspora arts field.

1.3 Late style, activism and current practice

Whilst there has been late recognition for several peers, mainly in the visual arts, there is a desire for a better infrastructure within mainstream and the South Asian arts sector itself to address organisational memory so that late style expression is supported, invigorated and continues to evolve as well as encouraging those that follow.

There are some differences in status for performing artists and visual artists in general as they age, i.e 'loss of certain faculties' versus 'maturity'. Ageism affects older artists from all backgrounds but this is compounded by discrimination.

When creating and commissioning new work, one dancer's practical suggestion calls for the creation of 'age-appropriate [shorter] pieces that take into consideration the restrictions of an ageing body' plus more afternoon programming in venues.

The realms for their continuing activism are online, academia, personal artistic practice, community arts and knowledge sharing. Some activism is focused on the global climate crisis rather than cultural identity. Several artists are prioritising their identity as an artist, giving time to experiment and growth.

1.4 Potential

Artists expressed positive ideas about the potential of sharing South Asian cultures more widely for benefit across wider society, and about greater visibility and representation in order to achieve this. In addition, greater status for the arts within South Asian communities might support challenge and debate around certain negative or limiting behaviours, attitudes and thinking.

If the potential of South Asian arts is to be realised in England, the call here is for investment and the need to address the imbalance in public funding for South Asian artistic practices. However, due to the negative financial impact of the pandemic, a shift in addressing structural inequalities seems unlikely. The question is which existing spaces and resources could be shared or made accessible for use by South Asian artists and older communities?

After 40 years of hard, hard work, it's great to see my popularity soaring. While it is nice to finally be recognised more publicly, what I've found most rewarding through my recent site-specific pieces is bringing a sense of joy and positivity into people's lives. It has been such a difficult time for us all and being able to make an uplifting impact is what I'm valuing most.'

Chila Kumari Singh Burman⁷

From interview by Anna Van Praagh, Evening Standard Magazine 4 October 2021

Whilst there were positive observations and hopeful remarks, these were also statements qualifying and/or balancing the hope with caution and pessimism borne out of lived experience. There were seven powerful and direct comments that referenced the need to address racism and discrimination. The artists' positive and constructive messages urge the necessity for counter-narratives, diverse leadership and structural change in the arts sector and the power of the arts to bring people together.

1.5 Work with South Asian older people

The artists gave us important information – most of them can (and often do) work with any older people, including people from similar cultural backgrounds. 60% of the artists have made work for and with older people to date. 50% expressed an interest in working with older people in South Asian communities going forward. What they would like to offer fell into two main categories:

- Participant-led, co-created activity
- Audience development and promotion of South Asian culture

Most artists, irrespective of their personal interest in working in this territory, expressed views on the benefits that older artists could bring to working with older people from similar cultural backgrounds.

There were three areas of positive direct impacts for participants and other beneficiaries/ audiences:

- Personal and social – e.g. encouraging creativity and empathy, alleviating isolation and loneliness
- Cultural and Political – e.g. immigrant experiences and contribution to UK acknowledged
- Artistic – e.g. new outlets for hidden or repressed artistic talent to be developed and celebrated

Mental and physical well-being was listed most frequently as part of each category.

The conditions and tools for delivering these benefits include:

- safe places to share vulnerabilities
- being multilingual as 'a gateway to making people feel heard'
- engagement approaches that involve deep listening and sharing,
- practical and emotional support
- inclusive practice and using their own personal experience

The artists indicated that the top three areas of training wanted to support work with older people are: mental health awareness, multi-sensory approaches and dementia awareness. One third of the artists surveyed have skills and extensive experience of working with vulnerable and marginalised groups and people with disabilities.

6 VISIONARY STORIES

The six stories listed below can be found in full in Research Findings section of this report. In addition we spoke to three arts, culture and heritage professionals and included in the summary are their perspectives on some of the same issues that are raised in the stories.

SANGINI AND THEIR WORK WITH SRIJONI

Sunderland and South Tyneside

This visual arts project was led by Indian and Bangladeshi artists involving Bangladeshi women many of whom were aged 55+. The Bangladeshi artist is an older woman whose talent and practice was recognised during the project and whose role changed from that of a participant to a lead artist.

HAVERING ASIAN SOCIAL WELFARE ASSOCIATION (HASWA)

Havering, outer London

This theatre project was led by an older South Asian artist working with South Asian older men and women who came from the diaspora and had caring responsibilities for loved ones. The artistic team included ethnically diverse artists.

GK AND HER EXPERIENCE OF ART BY POST

Southbank Centre, UK wide

This is a personal account of an older woman's experience of a multi -art form project led by 17 artists from diverse cultural backgrounds, commissioned to produce resource packs as inspiration for work at home during lockdown.

NAVRANG ARTS

Leicester

They create arts, heritage, exhibitions and multi art form projects and events. The lead members, who are all 55+ describe several multi-art form projects involving older people.

SOUL CITY ARTS

Birmingham, *Bangladeshi Tales from King's Cross*

This film and photography project features Bangladeshi elders, mainly men, and was led by a mid-career Bangladeshi artist.

SUBRANG ARTS

Croydon, outer London

Indian visual and performing arts projects, events and education. This story describes how the women in their 50s and 60s play a pivotal role working with people of all ages and in particular across the different older age groups.

2.1 Purposes of the work with older people: direct and ultimate impacts

The question really framed for this project was, what does the notion of cultural entitlement mean, for Muslim women?

Padma Rao, artist, Sangini Project Coordinator

The stated purposes of the six projects are about cultural heritage and identity, physical and mental wellbeing, creative self-expression and empowerment. The organisations aim for direct impacts on individuals and their communities and to have an ultimate impact on the cultural landscape of wider society.

Impacts on individuals and on their communities

When I work with folk dances, I absolutely love working with older age groups because they connect to it so much. Yes. And you know with that whole energy, it becomes different.

Harsha Amin, choreographer, Subrang Arts

This connection to creativity is not only fulfilling for the older participants. Harsha sees it as a means to keeping this culture alive, to promoting it and making it accessible to all ages. Project participants described the pride and admiration expressed by their families and immediate community who came to see performances and exhibitions.

Wider impact on society

As well as considering the impacts on participants, the lead artists and organisers, when talking to us, also discussed making an impact on our wider society through showcasing artistic work, communicating cultural ideas and values and challenging limiting stereotypes. Thoughts were expressed that some perceptions about the role of art in some South Asian communities need to be challenged. However, above all, limited perceptions of South Asian artistic practice and community arts practices need to be made visible to dominant systems of cultural meaning that inform discourse, practice and content in our cultural institutions.

The legacy of South Asian arts is part of the UK's heritage and having work represented in local and national galleries, museums, archives, theatres and art centres is essential.

Urgency

When working with older people, capturing both stories and creative skills is an urgent task as the pioneering diaspora generations who came to the UK in the 1960s and 70s approach the end of their lives.

We knew very well that in 10 years, these people might not be around. So we specifically targeted them for their oral histories. Member, Navrang Arts

2.2 Outreach, language and community

We asked lead artists, group organisers and participants about whether the language spoken by the lead artist was a significant factor for them. Whilst several groups had had positive experiences of working with white artists, working with someone who could speak their mother tongue was a key factor for taking part, followed by working with someone who may not speak their language, but who is from a South Asian background. These factors mean that trust and confidence are built swiftly and practical barriers to participation, whether personal, social or financial can be addressed more speedily and with cultural sensitivity. Being with friends and making new friends is an important part of the community arts experience, so that an older person's networks can continue to grow through these life stages that can encompass three to four decades.

So when we have a teacher like say Roohia or Parvin, it's great, it's a bonus. Because they also understand the cultural issues and myself and the ladies felt really comfortable. And they know they could talk, they could share, because we have a common thing. Asma Shohid, founder, Srijoni

There is a strong argument for valuing the language skills of older artists who are in a position to both communicate and receive the nuances of cultural knowledge and value systems that could be lost. Keranjeet Kaur Virdee from South Asian Arts -UK spoke to us about the loss of language skills amongst younger generations who have grown up in the UK, which does have a direct impact on retaining authentic meaning. For example, when passing on songs at weddings, young people dance to the music without understanding the language, and so the song's meaning is stripped. Keranjeet told us about several older women in cultural organisations in Leeds and Bradford who play an informal role of 'cultural guardians', sharing and teaching songs and their meanings to younger people.

Keranjeet also made the point about how language brings people together culturally, where faith might divide them:

Language is what gives them their nuance of cultural identities, that we're all Punjabi-speaking. It doesn't matter whether you're from one side of the border or the other [...] wherever you are in the world, your Punjabi culture is common. You might have a slight dialect, like the Mirpuris speak Punjabi with a slightly different dialect, but culturally, food-wise, how we talk, how we laugh, how we joke is very similar. Keranjeet Kaur Virdee, Director SAA-UK

2.3 Exploration and personal growth

When older participants meet in a creative setting where the cultural needs are considered and met, and perhaps because of these conditions, there is space to be stretched. New talents and dormant skills are discovered amongst them, they can be "extended".

It takes time, how many times were we told not to waste time, whether it was religiously, culturally, or just at our home. [...] When the women came together, they didn't realise how therapeutic it was to just do things slowly and spend time on them, which they were never allowed to. Museum professional, on an embroidery project that they hosted.

Like some of the people I was shocked that they were such good singers, [...] they were just all hidden because we were not [usually] in that atmosphere where it shows that you have this and these capabilities. Nearly everyone was a poet! I could not have imagined! Participant, HASWA

As in any good creative process, artists and participants learn from each other during these projects. Mohammed Ali, Co-founder Soul City Arts, said he and his team learnt 'everything about trust, faith, strength, courage, overcoming fears, heartbreak, longing, loss and gain.' For the film's subjects, Bangladeshi elders, it was more about personal growth and pride that their stories were significant enough to be shared.

In some of the studies, we hear about older artists emerging at a later stage in life, their creative interests having been discouraged in their youth, aspirations hijacked by life experiences, lack of money or simply never having had the opportunity to learn skills and develop artistic expression. One artist, discovered by Sangini, is looking forward to her first professional mural commission, having covered all the interior walls of her house with murals for over seven years. She is also seeking a mentor to reposition herself within the contemporary British context.

2.4 Programming

The museum and heritage workers we spoke to also emphasised the importance of programming work that can resonate with South Asian communities, especially if they are not currently attending these spaces.

Horizons are expanded through taking part in these projects, e.g. participants were introduced to local museums that hold or host South Asian collections and exhibitions such as in Leicester, Birmingham, Manchester and the British Library. Visiting the Arts Centre in Washington, Tyne and Wear, was a new experience for the Srijoni women and exhibiting Islamic Calligraphy was a first for the Centre.

I don't want my daughter to grow up being a stranger to these places, I want her to think that it's normal to go to a gallery. Participant, Srijoni

The importance of ambitious programming is reflected in the six stories, – from projecting work onto national institutions such as the British Library and involving participants on stage alongside professional performers at Queen's Theatre Hornchurch to co-creating major exhibitions for city museums.

The Sangini/Srijoni project exemplifies how well digital meeting platforms can be used and a good illustration of how creative ageing practice is supported and developed in an intergenerational setting.

2.5 Visibility, representation and legacy

The sharing of cultural knowledge both between the generations and wider society is common to all six stories. To have an effective and wide reach, this sharing requires recognition and visibility both within South Asian diaspora communities and beyond them.

Despite proving that there is an audience for South Asian cultural content through creating exhibitions and spectacular events, the stories illustrate that there continue to be challenges and barriers to receiving public funding. It is a tribute to Navrang Arts' ambitious vision, and their tenacity of purpose, that *From Kampala to Leicester* is housed as a permanent exhibition at Leicester Museum. Also, *6000 Lights: The Story of Diwali in Leicester* has been archived at the Leicester Records Office.

I still think it's this fear of, I don't know, these alien people taking over our museums.

[...] there are national museums, who could lead the way, national art galleries, and some of them have done some excellent work. There's great work going on in Birmingham. But I guess it takes a black leader to do that. Member, Navrang Arts

In terms of spaces for older people to discuss, create and share work, they believe that our museums and galleries are attractive but the content and engagement 'needs to speak to them,' - generic marketing and outreach do not. And the message is that our institutions need diverse staff, right across the board, in all departments. Change is happening and when one city museum, for the very first time, gave prominent display space to the embroidery of a group of older women, it had an enormous impact on them and their families.

I don't think they understand the power that they have. And how much it can change the dynamics of communities if they're inviting, inclusive, open, honest, give a space.[...] They're still getting up to scratch with their power and how much change that they can make for access to heritage. I hope having me within it will definitely allow for some big changes to happen for [my city]. Museum professional.

Navrang Arts, Subrang Arts and Soul City Arts are conscious that any legacy created through arts projects has to be significant and relevant for the community creating content as well as for mainstream/other audiences. In addition to having artefacts and artworks represented in collections and archives, work in the public realm, performances in venues, broadcast and digital platforms are vital for inter-generational and global impact. Physical hubs are essential, says Mohammed Ali. The new cultural hubs are not places of worship, although he knows these are still necessary, but arts and culture hubs:

They need to be established so that future generations are able to identify and connect with their identity, their culture and their heritage.

Mohammed Ali, Soul City Arts



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Lippan artwork, Subrang Arts,
Image Elizabeth Lynch

RECOMMENDATIONS

The creation of horizontal, rhizomatic forums for exchange is most important. What is most needed is connectivity. We should be in touch with one another, however that is facilitated. Interdisciplinary, multi-form artist

We want our needs to be met culturally in the way we would like to meet them. Member, Navrang Arts

The researchers are both older practitioners and want to see work by, with and for older people in all communities thrive. They do not claim to be impartial about this research. They believe their knowledge, interest in and experience of working with artists and communities means that between them they can understand those parts of South Asian artistic practice and community arts practices not always visible to dominant systems of cultural meaning. The findings offer us all both insights and inspiration for inclusive

creative ageing practices and those who host and nurture them. They also indicate actions - shifts and changes in behaviours and attitudes, approaches and policy delivery.

We recommend that mainstream institutions, organisations and funders are proactive at every level to consider actions and processes that acknowledge the following factors when commissioning, programming and funding work with South Asian diaspora communities:

1. **The profile and contribution of older South Asian artists needs to be raised with both South Asian and mainstream arts and culture organisations and space created for conversations that matter.**

Older artists want visibility, recognition and connection in acknowledgement of their contribution to the arts and heritage sectors in England

- To progress their own practice
- To share valuable skills and experience with other artists of all ages, their respective communities and wider society.
- For their experience and work to be valued through more representation in public collections and for their voice to be heard through opportunities to speak at conferences or sit on panels awarding grants or accolades

2. **Legacy and counter-narratives, collective history and urgency.** As those communities that arrived in the first waves of post war immigration grow older, this is an historical moment in time when stories, artworks, and artefacts need to be collected for successive generations to study and appreciate and for the contribution of the South Asian diaspora to be placed in the story of art, culture and heritage in England. Funders need to acknowledge the significance of legacy, the 'brickwork' of the south Asian arts industry. There is a sense that collective history and memory is being lost and the wheel is being reinvented.

3. **Building a diverse and representative arts and heritage workforce in mainstream institutions is essential.** Legacy is not only about looking back but continuing to develop and grow artistic expression through the later life stages. Mainstream arts and culture organisations need to identify a strategy and practical actions to address workforce diversity to recognise the impact of decades of discrimination on South Asian artists' practice and how this intersects with ageism.

People have said that the work that I have done has bridged the gap between cultures. I don't like the word 'bridge', which always means there is a separation. I like to dive to the riverbed, if you like, to find things that are of common interest.

Bisakha, from The Artist in Time by Chris Fite-Wassilak¹

¹ **The Artist in Time** – A Generation of great British Creatives by Chris Fite-Wassilak, commissioned by Baring Foundation [Bloombury Publishing](#)

4. South Asian-led outreach and arts facilitation for older South Asians is effective and beneficial.

Arts and heritage work with older South Asian people led by artists and facilitators from the same cultural background delivers several benefits. Using common languages and attuned to cultural nuance, they create conditions that pay attention to family circumstances, cultural needs, their faith, economic circumstances and that value their lived experiences and therefore offer relevant opportunities that resonate

5. Language is important. South Asian languages are a lightning conductor for outreach and communication with older diaspora communities, carrying with them cultural knowledge and values. People from different faiths and continents are united by their common tongue. Speaking their own language helps participants to feel accepted and more confident about taking risks and expressing themselves authentically and creatively.

6. Sharing of knowledge and expertise in creative ageing, and more generally, should be more effectively facilitated between South Asian cultural organisations, for example to identify artists, raise funds and to connect with mainstream institutions working regionally and nationally to encourage partnership working and access to resources.

7. Volunteering with South Asian cultural organisations is crucial to their existence and in many cases the notion of service is fundamental to their values. There should be greater visibility and recognition for the contribution that older South Asian people have made, and continue to make to this country, to civil society and to England's cultural heritage, for example through National Campaign for the Arts' [Hearts for the Arts Awards](#)¹.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

I feel more creative now than ever before, and it's my plan to make as much as possible before I am unable to.

33 Visionary Artists – 'Where we're at'

When planning this research into creative ageing we felt strongly that in addition to looking at good participatory practice in community settings we should also capture the experiences of the generations of practising artists who came to this country across five decades, during the 1950s–2000. These artists are pioneering, inspiring examples of creativity, curiosity and imagination in later life. Many of them are already engaged in making work with and for older audiences and participants and as this research illuminates, they make a unique and essential contribution to older South Asian diaspora communities.

Their distinctive experiences as artists who came as immigrants, displaced people or refugees are perspectives that need to be acknowledged and included as we all continue to explore and reflect on the cultural and creative contribution of older people.

Identifying the sample

The artists who have participated in this research represent a wide range of practice and art forms. Some have built successful careers in the arts and are well known for their work within the arts sector. Those artists have presented their work on leading stages, galleries, museums, film festivals and so on. Others have had parallel careers as artists and academics or community artists. Some have profiles and reputations only within their particular communities, operating via word of mouth or South Asian media.

Their work may or may not be directly influenced by South Asian artistic traditions, although it could be said that all their work embodies intrinsic qualities that reflect their cultural identities. A few have pursued distinctly experimental, leading edge artistic practices.

We are grateful that these artists gave their time to this important study and several of them have told us how timely and relevant they believe it is.

The artists invited to participate in the survey and interviews were identified through the professional and personal networks of the researchers and CADA, in order to work within the available budget and time frame. We were mindful of inviting a representative sample of South Asian diaspora backgrounds, identities, disabilities, faiths and cultures. We also aimed to include artists based in several locations across England, artists who represented a range of experiences – from mainstream careers and consistent employment in the arts, freelance practitioners and academics to artists recognised only in South Asian community circles.

Challenges

We acknowledge that despite our best efforts, in some instances, this aspiration did not bear fruit, e.g. we did not receive responses from the South Asian diaspora of the Caribbean, Sri Lanka or Afghanistan. We were surprised that only one participant responded from Pakistan. A full breakdown of where the artists were born, grew up and now live can be found in **Appendix 2.1** along with more details of the languages spoken, forms of artistic expression, routes into the arts and contexts for their practice.

33 artists responded to the survey invitation, which was sent to 42 artists in total. The artists who participated were aged between 54 and 76 years in June 2021.

Identity, How do you tell it?

We asked people to tell us how they described their identity, rather than asking them to tick boxes. This yielded a much more nuanced story about identity that foregrounds more than one country (100%) and their faith (58%).

A detailed breakdown of the data can be found in Appendix 2.

Place and Faith: 100% of the artists indicate a place as part of their identity and 55% indicate a faith as part of their identity.

Muslim, Londoner/British, Mauritian in that order. My criterion is from Islamic teachings.

Languages spoken:

Unsurprisingly, the survey findings give a snapshot of the large linguistic resource amongst the artists. We are sure that a wider, more comprehensive survey would include more South Indian languages and in greater proportions.

The survey participants speak or have knowledge of 14 different languages between them. There are five people who speak five languages.



IDENTITY: HOW DO YOU TELL IT?

INDIAN BY BIRTH, PAKISTANI BY MIGRATION, BRITISH BY CHANCE... NOMADIC AT HEART AND SPIRITUAL

Muslim, Londoner/British, Mauritian in that order. My criterion is from Islamic teachings.

Indian, Sikh, British-Asian

Marathi origin Gujarat, India, Hindu by religion. Though OF Marathi origin, I was born in Baroda, Gujarat region, I know Gujarati Culture very well.

Born in Kenya of parents with Sikh and Indian/Punjabi Origin.

English Pakistani mixed, but not necessarily equally

British Asian

Bangladesh Sylhet

A Black woman of Indian heritage

I am British Bangladeshi with a world view

I am a British Asian and practicing (non orthodox) Hindu religion

Muslim Bangladeshi

British Bangladeshi / Hindu

Muslim

My father was from Kolkata. My mother from the UK. Diaspora roots and branches. Religious influences Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity.

Indian, Punjabi, Spiritual, Well Travelled & deeply connected to the post-partition cross border culture of India & Pakistan.

Muslim Bangladeshi

Parents with Sikh and Indian/Punjabi Origin.

Indian origin with in depth knowledge of Sanskrit and Indian philosophy

Bangladeshi/Sylhet/Islam - I am a Bangladeshi British born in a Muslim family from Sylhet.

Punjabi, Indian, British Asian, secular Hindu Indian

Bangladeshi

British Indian

Indian, Canadian, British

My father was from Kolkata. My mother from the UK. Diaspora roots and branches. Religious influences Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity.

Sikh/South Asian

I call myself a British Asian... obviously I am Indian by race and consider myself a critical friend of India rather than an NRI but Indians may consider me an NRI

British Indian

I am a Hindu Bengali from West Bengal, India.

I am African of Indian descendants but influenced mainly by my Indian heritage.

I am a Hindu Bengali from West Bengal, India.

I come from a musical family, I am Hindu Brahmin

Forms of artistic expression. Most artists indicated using more than one form. Over 50% indicate theatre and 50% indicate literature. Fine art and film / TV come next, indicated at 42% for each. A third of the sample indicated other art forms including storytelling, working with circus artists, animation, traditional Indian art forms, (e.g. Kathak dance, rangoli¹), glass, fashion and textiles, jewellery design and community arts. Involvement in community arts and arts education is a common thread as is the sharing of practice in formal education settings and informally through participatory practice.

My expressive drivers are not limited to a certain medium, to get ideas across to create and at times co-create moments of welcome in which stories can be told or exchanged.

Routes into the arts have been chiefly via self-employment (52%) and activism (18%)

Given the age range surveyed this isn't surprising, especially when we consider the artists early-career years in UK against the backdrop of racism and the anti-racist movement, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. One artist simply states 'racism' as their route into the arts. Six indicated specific activist roles, e.g.: *I am a 1971 freedom fighter.*²

The contexts for their practice are varied. 82% have worked in mainstream, subsidised contexts and in community/participatory arts/socially engaged settings. 48% have worked in mainstream commercial arts and 45% in the fringe/alternative sector, both subsidised and independent. 29% have worked for private patrons and events.

¹ Rangoli is an art form in which patterns are created on the floor or a tabletop using materials such as powdered limestone, red ochre, dry rice flour, coloured sand, quartz powder, flower petals, and coloured rocks. It is an everyday practice in Hindu households, however the colours are preferred during festivals and other important celebrations as it is time consuming. Designs are passed from one generation to the next, keeping both the art form and the tradition alive. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangoli>

² NB This artist is Bangladeshi and refers to the 1971 Liberation War between former East and West Pakistan. The Bangladesh Liberation War, also known as the Bangladesh War of Independence, or simply the Liberation War in Bangladesh, was a revolution and armed conflict sparked by the rise of the Bengali nationalist and self-determination movement in what was then East Pakistan during the 1971 Bangladesh genocide. [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangladesh_Liberation_War)

1. Visibility and connection

Being in a conversation that matters Artist

This section presents the detailed findings on the factors impacting on their status and practice as older artists. We asked “*What three things are missing for you in England’s arts sector?*” 29/33 (88%) artists responded to this question with 87 words/phrases.³ There were two prominent themes about what is missing: Visibility and Connection. We followed up these themes with a further question to 11 of the artists, asking ‘*What needs to happen to achieve greater visibility, representation, respect? Can you give us up to 3 achievable actions?*’

1.1 Visibility, Recognition, Respect and Representation (25/87 comments, plus 20/33 ‘achievable actions’ offered in follow-up questionnaire)

Older artists want to have greater agency in the arts sector, recognition, for their experience to be valued; more representation in public art collections, galleries, museums and archives and in print – e.g. monographs/catalogues; to be asked to speak at conferences, sit on juries etc., and to have more news coverage of their work.

There needs to be a greater presence in national collections of contemporary South Asian art works, we need to be able to walk into any of our museums and galleries and see such work at any time, not just on special occasions.

In the follow up questionnaire, the following ‘achievable actions’ to address visibility etc. were suggested, which have been grouped under the four headings below.

Leadership

The consensus is that representation needs to happen at a senior leadership level in the arts and culture sector. There has been some shift towards the appointment of more people of colour to leadership roles in leading organisations, some as a result of the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement during 2020, some as a result of initiatives as part of the Cultural Leadership Programme. Representation in public funding bodies, Trusts and Foundations and in corporate giving still has a long way to go.

You need to have enablers in place to give the opportunities with financial backing and the access to venues or even community centres to be able to demonstrate what you’re doing and how.

People need to be able to speak about their art, what uniquely inspires and moves them – not just about diversity and representation.

Education

Within the education system, South Asian visual and performing artists need their work to be included in school and higher education curriculums. One visual artist wrote:

For this to be sustainable there needs to be sufficient available documentation. It cannot be just left to organisations like INIVA.⁴

³ Some of these phrases contained more than one idea, hence the total figures given in the text add up to more than 87.

⁴ <https://iniva.org/> Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts) is an evolving, radical visual arts organisation dedicated to developing an artistic programme that reflects on the social and political impact of globalisation.

Commissioning and programming intergenerational work

There is consensus that intergenerational work is valuable – especially now while older diaspora generations are living – in order to carry-forward the story of South Asian arts and activism, to share knowledge and promote discourse about what has gone before, and to inform new work. Reviving relevant, significant plays, dance productions and curating exhibitions would make an energising contribution to this process.⁵ One artist is finding that her mid-50s lived experience is starting to be noticed and valued by some younger writers and directors looking to tell more nuanced stories.

They value people like me who bring a multi-lingual palette and a body of experience to the table. This is still an early development but our languages are coming into the fore in a more visible way.

Connected to this train of thinking, mentioned by several artists, is the desire to not reinvent the wheel, e.g.:

It's not [only] saying we know best, and we want to pass that on. But it's also about 'these are the mistakes we've made. These are the things that we don't want the next generation to try'.

When creating and commissioning new work, one dancer's practical suggestion calls for the creation of '*age-appropriate [shorter] pieces that take into consideration the restrictions of an ageing body*' plus more afternoon programming in venues.

Overall in the findings there is a strong call for more programming of inclusive, diverse community arts projects.

Digital training and media training

This came up in 6/33 comments recognising the importance of having an online presence when digital platforms are becoming more influential and relevant to conveying messages and narratives. In addition, media training for live presentation skills was suggested.

1.2 Connection, professional development, solidarity

(23/87 survey comments, plus 4/33 'achievable actions' offered in follow-up questionnaire)

The creation of horizontal, rhizomatic forums for exchange is most important. What is most needed is connectivity. We should be in touch with one another, however that is facilitated. Interdisciplinary, multi-form artist

The artists signalled the need for more opportunities to meet and **share practice, skills and ideas**, e.g. discussion forums, network groups. Whilst eight artists are part of community networks in Sandwell, Slough, Tower Hamlets (x3), Leicester, Newcastle and Sunderland and eight listed 24 mainly literature and performing arts networks,⁶ their comments demonstrate that these are not fully meeting these artists' wants and needs.

Profiles of selected artists could be published and disseminated. Targeted invitations, such as this present one [CADA research], are helpful.

5 This artist suggested: *Rung or Tihai* by [Nahid Siddiqui](#) or *Papa Was a Bus Conductor* by [Parv Bancil](#)

6 Listed in Appendix 5

Respondents to this survey, for instance, could speak to one another. We might engage in dialogue, compare and contrast experiences, and develop new initiatives, through mechanisms such as group shows, panel discussions, video interviews, podcasts and social events.

There was a call for better **sharing of resources and physical space** by publicly funded organisations. As with most visual artists, there is a need for affordable studio/workshop space, much of which has been lost to commercial development in so many areas in the past 20 years.

England's arts sector is perceived by several artists as 'not easy to navigate'. One person also commented that 'support from the South Asian arts sector' would be appreciated, referencing a perceived replication of mainstream hierarchies within the diaspora field.

2. Late style: the status and value of older artists

Late style for a visual artist is a reflection of maturity whereas the late style of a performing artist is seen as a "loss" of certain faculties, rather than that style being recognised as a statement of the ability to embrace the change.

The follow-up questionnaire asked "Do you feel part of a wider movement that is recognising the status and value of older artists? In what ways is it different for performing artists and visual artists?" There were mixed responses, as might be expected:

I feel like there is a current strong interest in the Thatcher years, the 1980s, the way that community building in the visual arts was severely undercut by government's policies and the responses to it. As a part of that generation [...] I see many of my contemporaries finally gaining some recognition; Chila Kumari Burman, Lubaina Himid etc, and of course, there is the renewed interest in my own work from that time.

I don't feel part of any wider movement that is recognising the value of older artists.

Some networks between these older artists do exist and some sense of a wider movement. However, whilst some elite institutions such as the Royal Academy and Tate do support the work of some, for less prominent artists, they feel that staying visible is more of a challenge, especially for artists working in the field of crafts where limiting perceptions prevail. One textile artist acknowledges the challenging of the arts/crafts boundaries by Crafts Council and Grayson Perry and the advocacy by the Tate of artists such as Annie Albers, Sonia Delauney and Sophie Tauber-Arp.

In my work, my craft reflects my culture, identity and understanding of the world and global issues that are around me, which I translate using materials and techniques that help to promote making and understanding of global issues.

Another artist says 'Recognition ebbs and flows' and that the legacy of performing artists 'is often carried through by students, whereas in the visual arts collections and discourses often focus on a few bankable names which align with white markets.' Organisations such as Pulse Connects⁷ have championed older artists.

Another reason for exclusion was identified by one artist:

The South Asian older artists are ignored because less able artists are picked up for their language fluency. They suffer from misrepresentation due to their regional accent.

As a poet this barrier is more relevant to me than a performing artist or a visual artist.

Within the South Asian sector itself, one performing arts producer identifies the lack of infrastructure to neither value older performing artists nor connect modern audiences to older work. It is not even made physically visible to illustrate the organisation's memory of buildings with a history of presenting this work.

The brickwork in the inside of Royal Court deliberately reveals the foundation bricks – to demonstrate its history. No such allowance has been made – say – at Watermans, or Leicester's Curve.

7 <http://www.pulseconnects.com>

As for feeling part of the creative ageing network, one artist expresses some disappointment:

Most of the time I feel connected to the wider movement in the field of creative ageing but not all the time. Asian dance artists are often an afterthought or completely ignored.

They point out that the different value that is placed on the late style of visual artists, whilst for dancers, their ability to embrace the impact of physical changes and to embody their gestures with a lifetime of experience is rarely recognised.

For all the artists we spoke to, from those in their early 40s in the community groups to those in their late 70s, the desire to make and share creative work is as strong as ever although some express the shifts and nuances they experience with maturity. This includes insights about a sharpening of their identity as an artist, satisfaction with their art, doing less and listening more, '*stepping back in wonderment*' as one artist puts it. They describe '*a depth of intensity that lived experience uniquely offers*'.

However, two urgent needs were identified that have been alluded to in other sections of this report and are repeated here for emphasis. One is that the funders acknowledge the significance of legacy, the 'brickwork' of the South Asian arts industry. There is a sense that collective history and memory is being lost and the wheel is being reinvented. Secondly, most growth opportunities are online, catering for younger people. Older artists are meeting a developmental roadblock here and need training/mentoring/opportunity that recognises and values what they have to offer.

"As a choreographer, Bausch had nothing to do with political correctness, but in this one brilliantly inventive act of casting she exposed the poverty of our ageist culture – particularly when applied to dance. The 65-plus men and women who performed Kontakthof not only gave the lie to the notion that we become invisible as we age; they demonstrated that we can look significantly more vital and alive."

Judith Mackrell on Kontakthof by Pina Bausch, The Guardian 7 April 2010⁸

3. Financial stability, space to create, personal aspirations

However, if *Let's Create* is the new ACE [Arts Council England] plan then we may see more work.⁹

Additional themes in the survey findings are captured below:

3.1 Lack of financial stability; Artists ask for: sustainable public funding, the need to address the imbalance in public funding for South Asian artistic practices, bursaries, residencies, more opportunities to sell work. (14/87 comments).

If the potential of South Asian arts is to be realised in England, the call here is for investment. However, post-Covid 19, the perception is that this is unlikely as all arts funding at national and local authority levels has suffered from cuts, venues have closed and access to the arts has become more limited.

The challenges are enormous, but with hard work there may be light through the tunnel if there is more funding available for small operations/ not for profit organisations to flourish. As they can help to deliver quality work and support diverse communities including young and emerging South Asian artists.

In the questionnaire responses there was a constructive suggestion about addressing inequality in public/private funding for underrepresented artists:

A new stream of rolling awards of £5K or less so that multiple artists can be funded throughout the year with the proviso that every five years artists can return to apply for funds – limits can be set to three applications over a period of 15 years.

3.2 More spaces are needed in which to make work, to exhibit, to rehearse and to perform. These included affordable studio space and more access to existing, publicly funded venues for both professional artists and for community organisations. (11/87 comments)

8 The Guardian/Judith Mackrell <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/apr/07/critics-notebook-judith-mackrell>
 9 <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/our-delivery-plan-2021-2024/equality-objectives>

Visual artists need financial support in the form of grants and patronage to support studio practices and fabrication of work, having a second job, usually teaching can take away your practice.

3.3 Personal aspirations: The artists expressed the desire to continue to learn and inspire, to be able to focus on their personal work and to have faith in their own dynamism and abilities. (11/87 comments)

3.4 Other comments were about the need for more training, appropriate funding to work with older people, intergenerational work, more opportunities to perform and help with grasping new and digital technologies. (12 comments)

4. Activism and artistic practice today

The pandemic has further disrupted an already questionable paradigm.

The follow-up questionnaire completed by 12 artists asked 'How do you carry your activism these days? What do you want to give your creative energy to?'

The responses indicated the following realms for their continuing activism: online, academia, personal professional practice, community arts and knowledge dissemination. Some activism is focused on the global climate crisis rather than issues related to cultural identity and discrimination. Some artists are prioritising their identity as an artist, giving time to their practice for experiment and growth. Personal projects are being created specifically for online sharing. These platforms also allow older artists to overcome some of the challenges of mobility and access.

The current explosion of online work helps me to stay active and engaged with a wider community of national, international and global audiences and artists.

Two artists see their lecturing roles at universities as a way to flex their activism.

Less on the streets and in public meetings and more via higher education. I translate my activism into teaching a curriculum that asks the difficult questions around race, representation and multiculturalism

Two artists see working in the community as a form of activism. One now puts their creative energy into showcasing South Asian Arts around the UK, through a touring exhibition and workshops within the community and schools. The other has been re-charged by the evidence for the achievements of community led work during the Covid19 pandemic.

Three artists describe how their approach to their professional practice in the performing arts is incorporating their activist values. One is focused on choosing work that is making a difference with the resources they have as an actor and a writer. Another is working in a contiguous field, such as Integrative Counselling. Another values their company's independence, which allows them to continue to manifest their activism in the work they make.

I am experimenting with my craft by writing poetry in a different South Asian dialect with English translation [to bring] more visibility to the indigenous cultures that reside within the minority community.

Two artists are more focused on global concerns:

I am exploring ways to incorporate embroidery and recycling as my means to activism. By experimenting with traditional sewing and making techniques, using textiles and found objects to tackle and promote gender equality, global and environmental issues and promote sustainability.

A narrow definition of the arts is becoming less and less relevant to me. I [...] have been involved in many structures predicated around "South Asian-ness". These are becoming less relevant to me against a backdrop of global concerns.

While making current work, two artists working together see their activism art now as contributing to a greater purpose, strategically contributing to the future of 100 more artists to come forward. They see it as their role now, to train and pass on the knowledge that they have acquired through their practice.

There's a massive disconnect, that we have all this experience or knowledge as activists that is sitting in our heads, but that information needs to be disseminated [e.g. online, via] a series of films that shares that knowledge that we've acquired, even our mistakes.

'Over the last few years [...] anti-immigrant rhetoric has become quite mainstream, [...] I think it's very important to counteract that by really promoting and celebrating the journey of immigrants and people of immigrant heritage in this country, and particularly musicians and artists in that respect.'

Nitin Sawhney, Musician and Composer, HARDtalk BBC World News 27 September 2021

5. Playing a role in supporting artists

I think there's a need for the younger generation to be informed by the journey of the people of colour in this country and how we've navigated and grown.

Mentoring for older, as well as younger artists, is a want and a need – not easily met without access to funding and networks. 25 (75%) of the artists surveyed indicated that they had mentored a younger artist, whilst only 15 (45%) had received mentoring themselves. Five (15%) had neither given nor received mentoring. The responses to the questionnaires reinforced the importance given by these artists to mentoring artists at any age, some bearing in mind that an artist can 'emerge' at any life stage. Support is being offered in people's roles as curators, artists, teachers, as dramaturgs and some artists specifically refer to the importance of intergenerational dialogue:

So many of my elders were serious amateurs who never imagined the possibility of professionalising their practice and yet published books of poetry or participated in thriving communities of singers. And for the younger generation the arts are polarised between a pervasive commodification of celebrity and a rich and rapidly-changing media landscape full of ephemeral hybrid forms.

As a textiles artist/ community artist, [...] I am working hard to encourage and support young people to access the creative and cultural industries.

Institutionally based researchers need to work with the older generation.

Finally one artist makes a good point about the importance of being recognised as a mentor by mainstream organisations, who have a wider reach and nationwide network and which do not currently cater to the South Asian voices.

Two South Asian arts and heritage professionals we spoke to drew attention to the lack of opportunity for people of colour in their sector:

In the heritage sector, or the arts and culture, you've got obstacles, even getting into it, never mind building your way up. Museum professional

They described how difficult it is to find a mentor in the sector, despite being part of the Museum Detox network.¹⁰ Evidently there aren't enough peers to meet the need as the same small number of names always crops up and so those people are busy.

¹⁰ [Museum Detox](#) is a network for people of colour who work in museums, galleries, libraries, archives, and the heritage sector. Museum Detox champions fair representation and the inclusion of cultural, intellectual, and creative contributions from POCs. They challenge and work to deconstruct systems of inequality that exist to enable a sector where the workforce and audience is reflective of the UK's 21st century population.

6. The potential of arts and ethnically diverse communities for the next five years.

The arts are a gateway to our collective humanity and ethnically diverse communities need a parity of esteem in the cultural landscape.

25 people (76%) gave mostly multiple and detailed responses to the question about potential and built on the responses in Section 4 above.

6.1 Sharing South Asian cultures more widely

for benefit across our society was a key theme but greater visibility and representation is needed in order to achieve this.

The wealth of work, knowledge and experience of contemporaries [...] ground-breaking work, some of which have been game-changers cannot be ignored - and fundamentally for me is to break the cycle of us as artists as always 'arriving' and of course being visible. This fits into working with older communities, as they are the least represented.

6.2 The role and status of the arts in South Asian diaspora communities.

Greater presence and status for the arts within South Asian communities might support challenge and debate around certain behaviours, attitudes and thinking was suggested by two artists. These thoughts resonate with comments made in some of the case studies and with museum professionals and participants.

I certainly think the Arts should provoke discussion particularly on 'taboo' subjects such as power structures in families, the rights of women and gay people, the role of religion etc. Additionally South Asian people should participate in mainstream political debates and contribute to social discourse.

As a woman of dual heritage I have a different take. I think those of us that stand between cultures have a special role to play both within the South Asian community and beyond.

6.3 Hope and reality

Whilst there were **positive observations and hopeful remarks**, these are also balanced by statements qualifying and/or balancing the hope with **caution and pessimism** borne out of long experience. Some of these have been quoted above.

On the back of the lockdowns and the sense of growing local community spirit, I see an ideal opportunity to use Arts & Crafts as a means of continuing to strengthen local communities and grow awareness of other people's culture.

At present it doesn't look very good ..being fractured, underfunded and breaking down but with continued efforts and persistence between sectors and activism and participation and public visibility and voices being highlighted,. There are unlimited potentials in enhancing the power, beauty and talent of these areas of work to benefit everyone who needs it.

6.4 Racism and discrimination

'It was actually about really finding a way to collaborate with people who have strong feelings about their immigrant heritage or about the immigrant past themselves, and to really give a platform to that voice as opposed to the voice that I quite often hear which demonises immigrants quite regularly.'

Nitin Sawhney, Musician and Composer, talking about his album Immigrants (2021), HARDtalk BBC World News 27 September 2021

There were seven powerful and direct comments that referenced the need to address racism and discrimination including:

Enormous [potential] to explore the deep sense of hurt/ betrayal of the legacy of colonial rule in post-Brexit Britain. Vital to tell the nuanced stories and for people to have those stories heard in a time when racist ideologies are front and centre of public and political narratives. The arts can heal and cohere and have great power in telling a counter-narrative to touch people's hearts.

I am not very hopeful that it will be too different. I can see that with a shrinking economy and reduced funding, the arts, especially diverse arts, get pushed to the margins. There are very, very few Black arts professionals to develop the diverse arts sector. So, there's a huge skills shortage. I have worked in the industry for over 20 years and in 2018, was part of organising a conference 'Whose Heritage – Revisited' by Northumbria University. Here we were talking about the same issues that Professor Stuart Hall raised 20 years ago.¹¹

To confront emergence of right-wing agenda in mainstream culture

Once we get out of the rat race mentality, ethnic diversity will be seen as diversity and all would benefit from each other's special gifts – a Potluck society. Arts and expression is part of the bigger picture. For me, micro and macro go hand in hand.

The artists' positive and constructive messages urge the necessity for counter-narratives, diverse leadership and structural change in the arts sector and the power of the arts to bring people together.

7. Artistic work with older South Asian people 55 years +

The artists gave us important information – most of them can (and often do) work with any older people, including people from similar cultural backgrounds.

7.1 Contexts and settings

Just over 60% of the artists surveyed (19/31 responses, i.e. 58% of the total sample) indicated that they had worked with older people, and 11 indicated 'no'. 48% (15) gave more information, which fell into three main categories, which in some cases overlap:

Making artistic work with and for older people

- Artistic work where the stories and experiences of older South Asian people drove and became the subject matter of the work
- Work by artists created for audiences of the older South Asian community
- Participatory work in day care centres and community organisations with artists facilitating and/or co-creating oral history projects, crafts, textiles, storytelling and dance projects on ageing.

I haven't done a dedicated project just with older people but I am always keen to include their stories in my work. Most recently Touchstone Tales (Revoluton Arts/Wellcome) and Final Farewell (Tara Theatre).

I worked as a resident writer and storyteller for a few years for Magic Me and worked with 55+ South Asians in a day care centre in East London.

29/33, (88%) of the respondents offered a rich range of settings for their work, 101 in total. These are listed in **Appendix 2.5** and include arts centres, theatres, museums and galleries, South Asian cultural and community organisations, festivals and melas, day centres, care homes, Gurdwaras, temples, schools and activist organisations.¹²

7.2 Interest in working with older people in South Asian communities

Creating participatory food gatherings in potluck style, each person bringing something to the table, be it something they have cooked, recipes, or stories of love and healing. I would love these engagements to bring different ages together.

Just over half of the artists expressed interest in working with older people (17/19, 51% of total sample). What they would like to offer fell into two main categories:

- **Participant-led, co-created activity** across several mediums¹³.
- **Audience development** and promotion of South Asian culture

11 <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/research/research-areas/art-and-design/multi-cultural-heritage/whose-heritage-symposium/>

12 We did not have the capacity to do a detailed analysis or classification of these settings

13 e.g. storytelling, theatre, fine art, photography, glass-making, music, singing, dance.

Some key aims stated were: generating dialogue to bring about personal and social change; improving mental and physical health; building friendships; developing creative skills; bringing different generations together and developing an interest in South Asian culture and self-expression.

7.3 Impacts: personal, social, political, cultural, artistic

Most of the sample, irrespective of their personal interest in working in this territory, expressed views on the benefits older artists could bring to working with older people from similar cultural backgrounds. These comments expanded on the two aforementioned categories. Three direct impacts come through the responses (29/33 (88%) with the positive impact on mental and physical well-being listed most frequently within each one.

The conditions and tools for delivering these benefits include: safe places to share vulnerabilities; being multilingual '*a gateway to making people feel heard*'; engagement approaches that involve deep listening, sharing, practical and emotional support, inclusive practice and using their own personal experience.¹⁴

The process of creating non-judgmental and safe places where people are able to share vulnerabilities, reveal their authentic selves without fear, is what I enjoy most.

The artists also indicated that the top three areas of training they would like to have for working with older people are in mental health awareness, multi-sensory approaches and dementia awareness. For more detailed information please see **Appendix 2.6**.

¹⁴ See also Ageing in Place for Minority Ethnic Communities: [The importance of social infrastructure](https://www.ambition-forageing.org.uk/ageinginplace). <https://www.ambition-forageing.org.uk/ageinginplace> "It is important that older people with a shared cultural identity have places where they can meet to maintain their sense of identity, and to maintain relationships and networks between people who share some form of commonality."

1. PERSONAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS

The encouragement of empathy, creativity, understanding, the sharing of ideas, self-expression.

Reducing loneliness "perhaps brought about by families busy elsewhere and the impact of lockdowns on social groups."

Improved quality of life, mental and physical well-being, confidence and self-esteem.

Reducing isolation, depression and anxiety.

"It helps them to interact more confidently with younger people." Artist

"[Being] socially connected with other women. Dancing in a group with other women makes them stress-free. Learning it was an opportunity which they could not do when they were young due to family constraints etc. It keeps them active [...] and helps them to improve their movement and coordination and reminds them that it is not too late to do anything, irrespective of your age." Artist

"The most worrying aspect of elderly life in the UK is loneliness which accelerates mental illness and feelings of rejection... Often the elderly do not have quality time with their families who might be too busy with their day to day working and living" Artist

2. CULTURAL AND POLITICAL IMPACTS

South Asian elders feel heard – the experiences, expectations and protests.

More people acknowledge the South Asian diaspora's contribution to UK culture.

People have an awareness of their politicised heritage and diaspora connections.

3. ARTISTIC IMPACTS

Artistic opportunities are provided that were not available to older people when they were younger.

Individuals and their talents are celebrated.

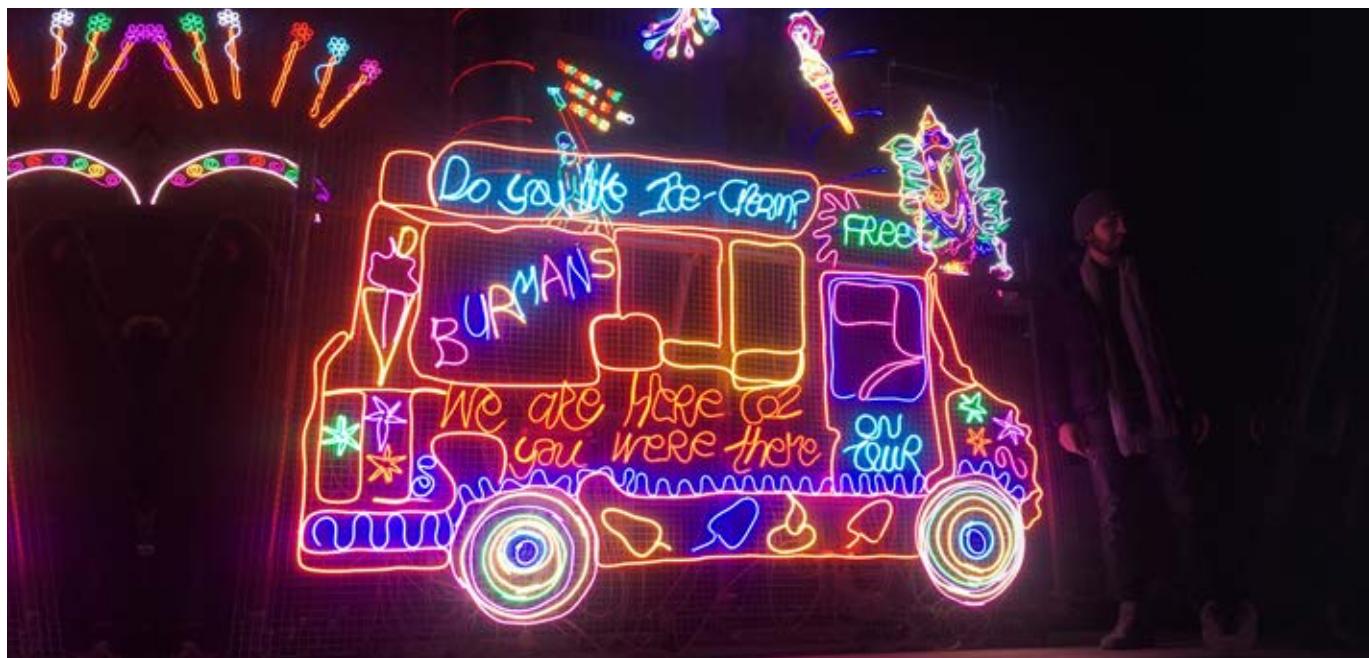
Older people are upskilled and feel more hopeful about the future.

The main benefit is helping them to find a connection with their cultural expressions, such as music, dance. My work helps them to bring back memories of their childhood/family/growing up in their country of birth. [...] Learning to make things often triggers conversations about traditional arts from South Asian sub-continent". Artist

8. A Visionary Story: Chila Kumari Singh Burman, Artist

'Late onset fame 'feels good'... 'You can deal with things more than you could before, you come into yourself.'

Chila Kumari Singh Burman



Detail from *Remembering a Brave New World*, by Chila Kumari Singh Burman
Tate Winter Commission 2020 Image: Elizabeth Lynch

So, I just thought: why not do something that captures what we're all going through right now? I felt like it needed a blast of joy and light. And Diwali is about good over evil, about hope, unity and the light at the end of the tunnel.¹⁵

Chila Kumari Singh Burman

In 2020 Chila Kumari Singh Burman was commissioned for the Tate Britain Winter Commission which ran from November 2020 – February 2021 from Diwali to Christmas until the end of February, through the darkest winter months and a pandemic lockdown. This commission ricocheted the artist's profile and international reputation onto another level. Media attention, exhibitions, public and commercial commissions have followed thick and fast during 2021 and Chila was understandably unable to take part in this research. With her permission we have used extracts from online content and interviews because her reflections resonate with our findings.

Burman is celebrated internationally for her radical feminist practice, spanning printmaking, drawing, painting, installation and film. Her Punjabi and Liverpudlian heritage enrich her self-expressive work. Burman mashes up stereotypes to create new identities, beyond the limitations imposed on South Asian women in a British cultural context.¹⁶ Tate Britain website

The following text has been abridged from an interview with Chila Burman (who is aged 63) for the Evening Standard magazine by Anna Van Praagh, 4 October 2021.¹⁷ It captures several of the issues highlighted in the findings of the artists' survey, activism, visibility, recognition by mainstream galleries, media profile and the positive impact of her work on audiences.

15 Quote from an interview with Dezeen: <https://www.dezeen.com/2020/11/16/chila-kumari-singh-burman-tate-britain-remembering-brave-new-world/>

16 <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/chila-kumari-singh-burman>

17 The full article can be read here: <https://www.standard.co.uk/insider/chila-kumari-burman-artist-covent-garden-tiger-b958067.html>

'From the Tate thing my profile has gone through the ceiling,' she beams, 'I've smashed through the glass ceiling. And now it's like so much in demand. I switch on my phone and it's like, oh my God. People treat me like a different person now.'

[Chila Kumari Burman] admits she is 'a little bit' pissed off fame has been slow to arrive, when she has been working as an artist for so long. 'That's why we talk about systemic racism. That's why we talk about anti-feminism. Why has it taken the Tate so long to commission me? Well, not just them... I had a lot of shows in the 1980s and 1990s because the art world recognised black and Asian artists then. Then all of a sudden it was like that was it. It was almost like some of the galleries were saying, "Well, we've done you all." So we all went off and did our own things.'

After graduating from the Slade in 1982, [...] Chila worked for decades 'exploring the experiences and aesthetics of Asian femininity', working largely – but not entirely – unnoticed at the intersection of feminism, race and activism as she funded her art with Greater London Council money from working as an artist in residence in schools. Moving in circles with artists such as Eddie Chambers, Claudette Johnson, Marlene Smith and Keith Piper, she was a key member of the British Black Arts movement in the 1980s and one of the first South Asian women to make political art in the UK. Around that time she co-founded an Asian feminist magazine published in six languages called *Mukti*. Tens of exhibitions followed and slowly Burman began to exhibit internationally. But it's fair to say her breakthrough moment has been slower than expected.

'It's true that women and artists of colour have been overlooked for too long by commercial galleries and in museum shows,' says Charlotte Appleyard, director of development at the Royal Academy. 'But that's changing very quickly. There's still a lot of work to be done but you can see a palpable change. It's exciting.'

[Burman] admires the work of Louise Bourgeois: 'She's so cool. And I also like the way she became well known much later in life... but you know it's the thing now'. Late onset fame 'feels good', says Burman. 'You can deal with things more than you could before, you come into yourself.'

'After 40 years of hard, hard work, it's great to see my popularity soaring. While it is nice to finally be recognised more publicly, what I've found most rewarding through my recent site-specific pieces is bringing a sense of joy and positivity into people's lives. It has been such a difficult time for us all and being able to make an uplifting impact is what I'm valuing most.'

But ultimately talk turns to gallery representation. Burman's success is beginning to exceed her capacity to single-handedly deal with all the admin involved in the selling and marketing of her work. 'I'm overdue gallery representation, of course I am,' she says. 'I think it's time for the diversity of British artists to be represented by our galleries, there's an imbalance and it needs redressing.'

6

VISIONARY STORIES

Anything that makes a person connect to their religion, to their identity and to their soul is a positive.

Nazmin Akthar, Co-chair of Muslim Women's Network UK, speaking at a Sangini and Srijoni online event. June 2021

Artwork Parvin Abdur. Image Padma Rao

Introduction to the findings

The community organisations and individuals who contribute to these six stories are led by women and men with a real sense of purpose. It was powerful to hear how they are motivated by service to their own diaspora communities and by a strong sense of cultural justice. Through making work that challenges stereotypes about experiences and creative expression, all the organisations are consciously facing outwards, working with mainstream partners to ensure that their legacy becomes part of collections, archives and programming.

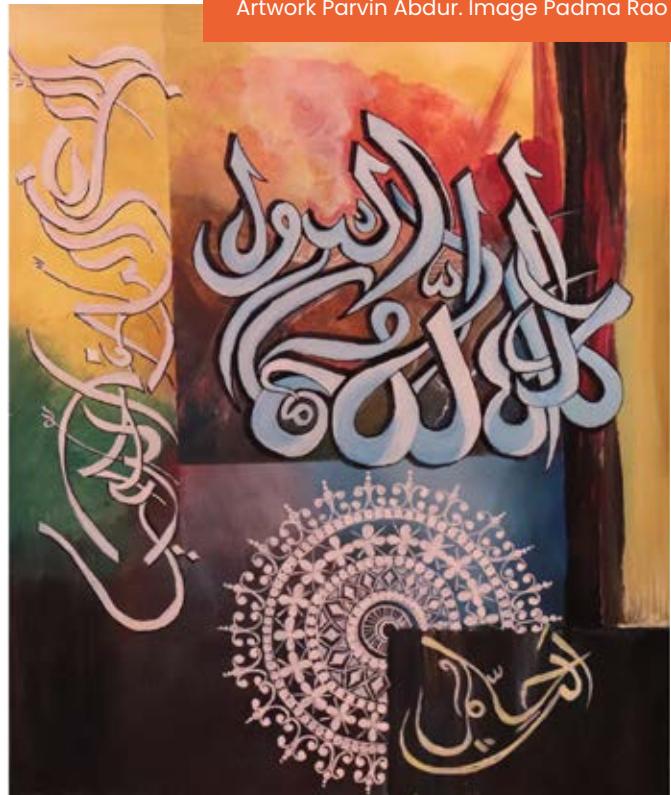
Their cultural heritage is a source of pride and they are acutely aware of the importance of, and the urgency for, capturing the stories of those pioneering elders who came to the UK between the 1950s and 1970s. It was exciting to have confirmed that there are many artists within the membership of these groups and more who they have identified through their projects, ranging across folk art forms to classical performance.

Some of the themes raised by the 33 artists are also found in these accounts, e.g – the desire and need for recognition and representation, the importance of cultural legacy for the future generations and the benefits of the arts as we age for both mind and body.

A valuable insight from these stories is the pivotal role people, mainly women, in their 50s and 60s play as connectors with both the older and younger generations. They speak the languages of their parents and encourage the transmission of cultural knowledge through participatory arts work, creative skills training and creative events and exhibitions that attract both South Asian and wider audiences.

We were struck by the powerful narrative around volunteering in some of these organisations, their proactive approach to partnerships and their ambitious vision for where their work could and should be seen and shared.

Working in partnership with their people and their communities is embedded in approaches which are holistic and inclusive, purposeful and dynamic. These stories tell us that stereotypes around outreach, engagement and programming must be challenged.



Identifying the sample

We offer these six stories as a snapshot rather than a comprehensive sample of high-quality artistic work with older South Asian people taking place in England 2020-21. Decisions about selecting our final set were based on quality and range of work, geographical spread and that we could have a first-hand experience of their work, either online or in person. The limited time frame and budget for this work were also contributing factors.

We contacted 29 individuals and organisations across England to identify suitable groups. As several organisations were not operating fully due to the impact of the pandemic, we were unable to reach around a third of those on our list, mainly because many are run on a voluntary basis and their groups were not active.

We attended events in person or online for all of the groups except for Navrang Arts. In addition we spoke to three South Asian arts, culture and heritage professionals plus one of their project participants, whose comments have been added to this summary where the themes aligned.

STORIES

Sangini** and their work with Srijoni,

Sunderland and South Tyneside

This visual arts project was led by Indian and Bangladeshi artists involving Bangladeshi women many of whom were aged 55+. The Bangladeshi artist is an older woman whose talent and practice was recognised during the project and whose role changed from that of a participant to a lead artist.

Harvering Asian Social Welfare Association*** (HASWA)

Harvering, outer London

This theatre project was led by an older South Asian artist working with South Asian older men and women who came from the diaspora and had caring responsibilities for loved ones. The artistic team included ethnically diverse artists.

GK and her experience of Art by Post***

Southbank Centre, UK wide

This is a personal account of an older woman's experience of a multi -art form project led by 17 artists from diverse cultural backgrounds, commissioned to produce resource packs as inspiration for work at home during lockdown.

Navrang Arts**

Leicester

They create arts, heritage, exhibitions and multi art form projects and events. The lead members, who are all 55+ describe several multi-art form projects involving older people.

Soul City Arts*,

Birmingham

Bangladeshi Tales from King's Cross. This film and photography project features Bangladeshi elders, mainly men, and was led by a mid-career Bangladeshi artist.

Subrang Arts**

Croydon, outer London

Indian visual and performing arts projects, events and education. This story describes how the women in their 50s and 60s play a pivotal role working with people of all ages and in particular across the different older age groups.

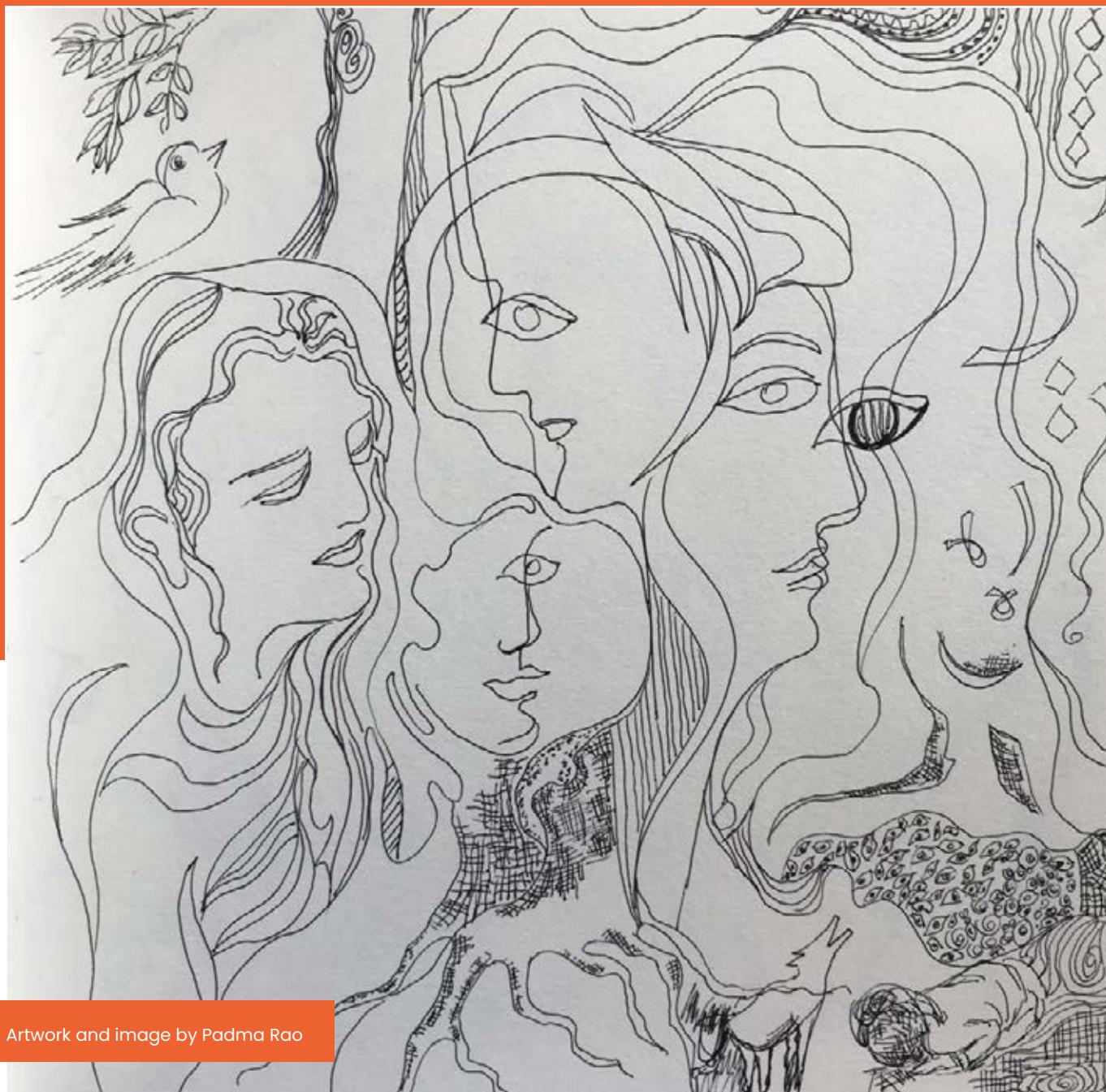
Note:

* organisation with paid staff, funded by Elevate, commissions and project grants

** organisation run on a voluntary basis with occasional paid staff supported via project funding and partnerships

*** organisation with paid staff, regular grant funding and earned income.

Apart from HASWA, these organisations do not exclusively work with older people. The case study projects all include people over 55, three of them exclusively so.



Artwork and image by Padma Rao

1. SANGINI AND SRIJONI SUNDERLAND AND SOUTH TYNESIDE

The question really framed for this project was, what does the notion of cultural entitlement mean, for Muslim women? Padma Rao, artist and Sangini Project Coordinator

This visual arts project was led by Indian and Bangladeshi artists involving Bangladeshi women many of whom were aged 55+.

SANGINI AND SRIJONI

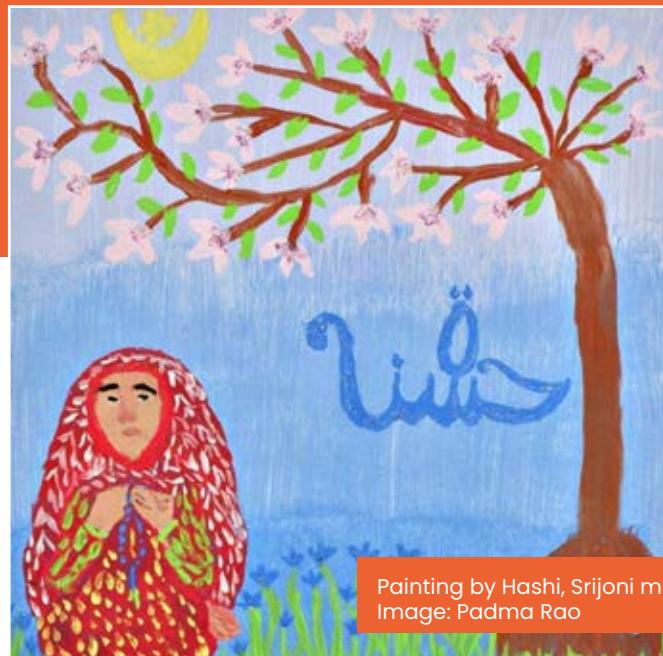
Sangini is a Black and South Asian led, multicultural women's arts organisation based in South Shields, Tyne and Wear. Through arts, crafts and heritage activities, they aim to improve the quality of women's lives, and empower them to have a greater sense of identity, wellbeing, and equality.

One of their activities is **Srijoni**, a wellbeing support group for Bangladeshi women. Srijoni – meaning ‘Creative’ in Bengali was set up in 2005 by Asma Begum. During the pandemic, with the help of Sangini, Asma revived the group and over 50 women, aged 20 to 65, regularly attended online sessions between September 2020 –April 2021. At the peak of the pandemic, the group met several times every week, engaging in activities ranging from arts, health talks to physical exercise which helped them to not only cope with the adverse impact of the pandemic, but also forge friendships, develop an appreciation towards the role of the arts in personal wellbeing, learn new creative skills and most importantly, learn to self-express. Encouraged by this, Sangini secured funding from Arts Council England to carry out a deeper exploration into the notion of creativity, cultural entitlement identity and self-expression among Muslim women, in particular Bangladeshi women in Sunderland and South Tyneside. The project was titled ‘Srijoni’ – aptly named after the group decided to focus on ‘creativity’ in an Islamic context.

During the project, they discovered serious creative talent in their midst including a prolific visual artist, Parvin Abdur.

These discoveries gave us a lot of hope. Women enjoy being creative, and they see that as a right to be expressive. Padma Rao

The project culminated in an exhibition *Exploring Islamic Art, Women and Creativity* at the Arts Centre Washington May–July 2021, displaying work by Padma Rao and Roohia Syed-Ahmed,¹ with contributions from the Srijoni women including Parvin Abdur and photographer Kainat Javed. The exhibition was supported by [The Cultural Spring](#)², [Arts Centre Washington](#) and [Sunderland Culture](#)



Painting by Hashi, Srijoni member.
Image: Padma Rao

Values and approach

Padma Rao has worked in the arts for over 20 years. When thinking about the arts in an unequal society, she asks how is culture defined and understood, especially when it belongs to “the other, the minoritised”. How are women perceived in a certain way, because of their faith, or their clothing, or the language?

The key issue, [that] informed the project was really the notion of visibility, or the lack of it, the narratives of displacement, multiple identities, culture as in consumption, occupation, and inheritance, language of culture and accessibility [...] equally around representation [...], how can we see a culturally informed piece or expressive work presented as part of the norm, within the wider context, and not just to celebrate the particular month, or a day. I’ve always been interested in the intrinsic nature of cultural expression, and how we create a space for these expressions to be enjoyed, viewed and experienced as a daily occurrence. Padma Rao

¹ As well as being Sangini’s coordinator Padma Rao is a visual artist <https://outsidein.org.uk/galleries/padma-rao/> Roohia Syed-Ahmed is a Sunderland University Fine Art graduate, <https://www.mwnhub.com/read-detail.php?id=85> Roohia was born in India and speaks Bengali.

² The Cultural Spring is a Creative People and Places project <http://theculturalspring.org.uk/> and <https://www.creativepeople-places.org.uk/>



Work by Roohia Syed-Ahmed.
Image: Padma Rao

Outreach

To be able to help the women who had never engaged with arts and culture before, the conditions for meaningful engagement with the Srijoni group were created at various levels, language, cultural, social, spiritual and practical. The outreach work by Asma Begum was crucial to the project's success. As a Bengali speaker she was able to interpret not only language but also social and cultural nuances, the well-being issues and the structures, norms and habits with this community.

When working with diverse communities, it's important that we're open and respectful to their ways of working. [...] it's important that we remain flexible with our time. Padma Rao

The engagement accommodated the women's lifestyle and the content was informed by an artist who shared the same faith and cultural background. For example, initially online sessions were hosted in the morning but were changed to a more convenient evening slot. As the exhibition deadline approached, Sangini were delivering five sessions a week with Srijoni.

This demand for more time demonstrates the value the women placed on this activity and also that the digital delivery was suitable and accessible. Working with the Bangladeshi women smashed several of the assumptions often made about this kind of group, e.g. 'difficult to access' or 'they don't take part in art' or 'they're not allowed to dance or listen to music and so on'. The women 'wanted to make work, they loved to sing'.

Art, artists and identity

Identifying the artist to lead the sessions was an important aspect of the project's design. Padma Rao had worked with artist Roohia Syed-Ahmed in the past and realised that Arabic Calligraphy was a very good way to learn and share something common to all of them.

Arabic calligraphy means a lot to me because it's the Quranic language and because it's so versatile as a language and writing it is even more rewarding. Each letter and every word has a meaning. I create things that have deep reverence and deep meaning for me. Roohia Syed-Ahmed, Calligraphy Artist and Painter³

³ Roohia Syed-Ahmed is a Sunderland University Fine Art graduate, <https://www.mwnhub.com/read-detail.php?id=85> Roohia was born in India and speaks Bengali.

The starting point for creative conversation was their names, which generated conversations about their identity, memories and tradition.

These conversations were not one dimensional, the women began to disclose their well-being issues. There were pandemic losses. So the women prayed together. And there were discussions around faith and chapters from Quran. We also discovered that women often missed having bookmarks when reading Quran. So using calligraphy, the women learned to make bookmarks which they would use in their everyday lives. Padma Rao

No matter if we were born here, brought up here, still we know from our parents, our roots and everything. So when we have a teacher like say Roohia or Parvin, it's great, it's a bonus. Because they also understand the cultural issues and myself and the ladies felt really comfortable. And they know they could talk, they could share, because we have a common thing. Asma Begum, Srijoni founder

Roohia and Padma regularly discussed and structured the online sessions to ensure that the women felt welcome, included and supported. Women shared that they hadn't been allowed to do art when they were young, or had been encouraged but did not have the opportunity to pursue their talent. Another said that she hadn't sung for 20 years – "and to hear her sing, during the session, was deeply humbling and very moving". The participants appreciated being able to write as well as read Quranic names and scripture.

As the weeks progressed, in this beautifully held online space, the artistic practice of one of the participants, Parvin Abdur was recognised. Mentored by Padma, Parvin began to lead creative sessions. She told us about doing a few art projects in Bangladesh, encouraged by her father and then after moving to Italy with her husband, running arts activities for women and children in a library. Since moving to South Shields in 2014 she has turned her house into an art gallery, painting the walls with decorative murals depicting fantasy Bangladeshi and European landscapes. In contrast her sketchbooks are filled with drawings that are more abstract, reflective, bold metaphorical representations of profound visceral feelings, inspired by the life stories and emotions of the Srijoni women. At 55, Parvin is starting to become visible as an artist, finding her strength and identity through joining Srijoni and being supported by fellow painters. What Parvin would like now, after the recent experiences of learning, teaching and exhibiting, is mentoring by an experienced artist, mainly to reposition herself within the contemporary British context.

Art is my passion. It is a pillar of strength and motivates and interests me. Parvin Abdur, housewife, mother, friend, and an artist.

We interviewed Hashi, a participant from Parvin's sessions who told us about her experience of calm and focus during the online classes. Parvin plays music to create this atmosphere and the craft activities she also leads have a therapeutic effect, reducing anxiety.



Women from Srijoni at their exhibition, Art Centre Washington.
Image: Padma Rao.

In our community, the ladies there, they're not brave enough to come out. They're stuck inside, so this is what I actually want to say, open the window, let yourself, let your dream out. [...] you shouldn't be frightened, you should be brave, and come out, this is what I actually like to say to our ladies. Parvin Abdur

The exhibition: Exploring Islamic Art, Women and Creativity, Arts Centre Washington

For the exhibition, Roohia focused on the word 'Iqra (إِقْرَأْ)', the first word in the Quran, that means 'read'. The word is repeated over and over in the letters used in the artwork.

Roohia explained that it means to read, but it also means to seek knowledge and to know that everybody has the capability of knowing, reading, acknowledging and having the right to know. From her perspective as a woman that is 'a big deal'.

The women visited a gallery for the first time and one said:

I don't want my daughter to grow up being a stranger to these places, I want her to think that it's normal to go to a gallery. Srijoni participant

Exhibiting their work has had an extraordinary impact on the women. Many had refused initially to be identified, but then went on to give expressive and articulate interviews for local ITV and radio.

We asked the artists and participants about the reception the exhibition had received from their families and their Bangladeshi community. The responses were about feelings of pride and admiration for their creative skills and for the subject matter. The very act of exhibiting artwork can be seen as problematic in parts of the Muslim community. Nazmin Akthar drew attention to this when she chaired an online discussion about the exhibition.

'We work with Muslim women across the country, on a daily basis on various issues. And one of the things we haven't touched on, quite frankly, is arts and culture. And the reason for that, to be perfectly honest, is a) lack of funding or resources and b) because there is a problem within, or in my opinion within the Muslim community where arts and artists are just not appreciated. The amount of times I've heard, you know, that music is haram, or art painting is haram, you can't draw pictures of animals, you can't do this, you can't do that. And I think it's absolutely amazing that actually, you've just highlighted why art is important for Muslims, because it's a way to connect to your religion. And anything that makes a person connect to their religion, to their identity, and to their soul is a positive.' Nazmin Akthar, Co-chair of Muslim Women's Network UK

Next steps

Whilst Sangini will keep up the momentum they have generated and continue to work with the Srijoni group, this case study indicates that there is inspiring practice here that should be shared more widely. This intergenerational project is led by women for women and brings together a significant combination of lived experience, cultural knowledge, artistic vision and professional expertise, using nuanced approaches that include people with less access to the arts, particularly women and older people. The project exemplifies how well digital meeting platforms can be used, and is a good illustration of how creative ageing practice is supported and developed in an intergenerational setting.



Roohia Syed-Ahmed
with her work



Love Unspoken, image by Patrick Baldwin

2. HAVERING ASIAN SOCIAL WELFARE ASSOCIATION (HASWA) AND LOVE UNSPOKEN BY SPARE TYRE

This theatre project was led by an older South Asian artist working with South Asian older men and women who came from the diaspora and had caring responsibilities for loved ones. The artistic team also included ethnically diverse artists.

Love Unspoken was the final in a trilogy conceived and directed by Arti Prashar when she was Artistic Director of Spare Tyre in 2019.¹ It was developed in collaboration with people living with dementias from South Asian communities, including HASWA.

Love Unspoken invited audiences of **people living with dementias and their carers** to co-create and perform alongside professional performers. The show explored the theme of love in its many forms and included ritual, dance and sound. It respected those participating and treated them as an equal partner in the live theatre experience.

Audiences enter into a ritualised space, scattered rose petals, water, salt, cherished items, evocative smells and moments remembered imbue the space with personal yet universal meaning, where grief is exposed but life and love is celebrated. Arti Prashar

Love Unspoken was a Spare Tyre production supported by The Mercers' Charitable Foundation and made in association with [Queens Theatre Hornchurch](#), where the show premiered in October 2019.

There was no dialogue, that was the beauty of it. And people who have got disabilities or learning difficulties, they can easily understand those things, and feel the emotion... I think you should have more of these projects and encourage Asians to speak out. Beena

Beena, Gurdev and Savitri, members of the HASWA group and who participated in *Love Unspoken*'s development and performances, reflected on their experiences of the show in October 2021 in conversation with Arti Prashar.

¹ Each piece of work in this series has developed as a result of what had been learnt from the former shows in the trilogy; [Once Upon a Time](#) and [The Garden](#). Arti observed that the need for dementia arts in South Asian communities was not being met, so for this show Spare Tyre worked specifically with that group.

"It was emotion and silent explanation, emotion."

Gurdev, HASWA member and Love Unspoken participant

Friendship

Beena reflected on her experience of working on *Love Unspoken* in comparison to other community arts projects at the theatre. She has really enjoyed working with the Queen's Theatre but there were particular features of the *Love Unspoken* project that made it special, including feeling at home with someone who knows your language, your background and with whom you already have a relationship, old friends.²

We were friends for years, we meet in the same community, in the same place and that makes a lot of difference. I feel very relaxed. And also we are all from the Asian community, it's like working from home. [...] This was like a party for me – it was like a party I went to – which was quite nice.
Beena

Language

Beena enjoyed the level of commitment, scale and intimacy of the *Love Unspoken* project and found it relaxing; she could just be herself, crack jokes and not worry about anybody getting offended. Arti asked her how the Spare Tyre team enabled this and Beena said that language was key:

It just comes naturally – I don't know how to explain that – because being a foreigner or living in a different country, speaking English which is not my mother tongue – I feel very relaxed talking to people in my own language and that makes the difference. And also people are very accepting and they know who I am, and there's no dirty looks if we are inefficient or not appropriate in any way, that's what I'm saying.
Beena

Personal growth

Under these relaxed conditions, and perhaps because of them, there was still space to be stretched. They discovered new talents and skills amongst their friends, that they could sing and write, they were "extended".

Like some of the people I was shocked that they were such good singers, [...] they were just all hidden because we were not [usually] in that atmosphere where it shows that you have this and this capabilities. Nearly everyone was a poet! I could not have imagined! Beena

Savitri connected deeply with the content of the show, which explored the feelings of love while living with dementia. She chose and sang a song about not being able to express love, but only the beloved understood your feelings. As with Beena, she talked about how speaking a mother tongue language brings confidence and nuance not only to communication, but also to insights and meaning when making and appreciating creative work.

Because when you sing these bhajans³ you have to be able to feel it deeply. They say if you enjoy something firstly internally then the audience will enjoy it. [...] But audience has to know a bit of the language and the meaning of that so that they can enjoy more. [...] And not many English people will understand – they might see your action and body action and might understand, but for really truly inside feelings, to my mind, one has to know the language. Savitri

The reaction of Beena's family and friends to the production was rewarding and varied. The non-naturalistic style of the production was new to them but they had wanted the show to be longer and her (adult) children were proud of her, "My mum can do other things – she's not just mum".

2 In the HASWA group

3 Bhajan is a devotional song with a religious theme or spiritual ideas

Performance and visibility

Gurdev liked many elements of the show e.g. the happy endings so "we could forget the seriousness in the rest of the show. For a live show we need more actors, with more parts, [...] Next time it should be bigger". Prior to the performance in the studio at the Queen's Theatre, HASWA members sang on a small stage in the foyer as the audience gathered. This was a small but symbolic intervention in this space. It was great to see this group of South Asian elders taking up space they would not usually occupy in the theatre.

We all enjoyed it and even the people who were listening enjoyed it. White people were there as well, they might not understand but they enjoyed it, overall. Gurdev

Beena also feels that involving people over 50 is important as from this age they can feel neglected and somewhat apart from younger generations, who "sit separately, and do everything differently". Doing things together, across the generations helps the understanding that older people have needs just like everyone else and want to be involved in the world around them. They want to connect and to communicate, to address isolation and loneliness.

That is the use of art, to communicate with another and make them feel something. Me being an artist I know I paint and I express myself. [...] I do try to express my joy about life and show the beauty in every person. The duty of any artist is to show the people the beauty. The world is an ugly place otherwise without art – that's what I think. Beena

Queen's Theatre Hornchurch continues its relationship with HASWA and the wider South Asian diaspora through the initiative [Havering Changing](#) which is a Creative People and Places initiative that was recently awarded funding for 2022 – 2025.





Love Unspoken
Image: Patrick Baldwin

3. GK, PARTICIPANT IN ART BY POST SOUTHBANK CENTRE

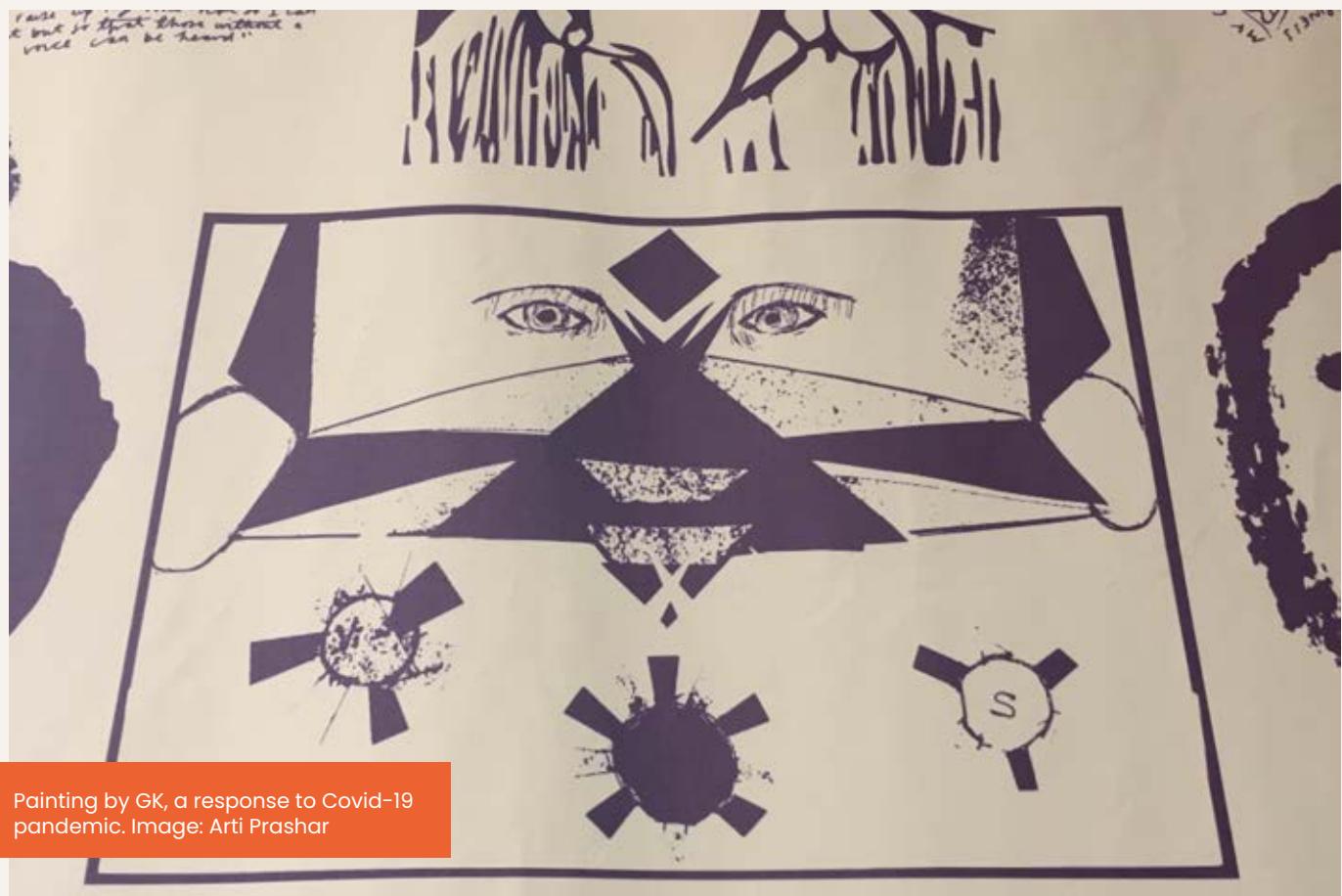
I thought, this is such a lovely idea somebody is putting together. And I just went and did it wholeheartedly in time. [...] Because all those booklets came, I was so focused on targeting, that this time factor is important. I have to sit down, commit myself, do it and send it off. And [...] it all came together to this and somebody recognised it.

This is a personal account of an older woman's experience of a multi-art form project led by 17 artists from diverse cultural backgrounds

GK had recently returned from a cruise in 2020, as COVID19 was being experienced globally. The UK was in lockdown and the world was changing. GK felt isolated. Participating in Art by Post, described below, enabled GK to rediscover and recognise her own creativity, and now she wants to use it to inspire others.

Art by Post was the Southbank Centre's landmark national Covid-19 response initiative. From May 2020, working with the [National Academy of Social Prescribing](#) and a number of local charities, the Southbank Centre sent over 40,000 creative activity booklets¹ through the letterboxes of over 4,500 people living with one or more long term health conditions.

Participants were supported to explore a vast range of creative tasks produced by a diverse and multidisciplinary team of artists encouraging them to be artistic and imaginative. Via Freepost envelopes that were included with each booklet, they received over 800 pieces of artwork to form the foundation of the Art by Post exhibition: *Of Home and Hope*.²



1 View the booklets here: <https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/creative-learning/resources/artbypost-resources>

2 See the online gallery here: <https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/creative-learning/arts-wellbeing/artbypost/online-gallery>



Painting by GK, inspired by The Show Must Go On resource

Of Home and Hope celebrated the power, resilience and positivity of the Art by Post participants from across the UK, aged 18 – 103 years who during the pandemic have been at further risk of social isolation, loneliness and digital exclusion. The exhibition's focal points – 'Nature', 'Sound & Movement' and 'Hope' – highlighted the basic needs that continue to be vital to us all: green spaces, music, dance, physical activity and people to share these experiences with.

Arti Prashar spoke to one of the participants, GK, (aged 71) about her experience. GK feels she is at a stage in her life where she can focus on herself and her creativity.

I'm developing whatever little skill I have. And then it was in my house in a safe environment within my time commitment. I felt good.

GK described some of the things she appreciated about the process of getting involved, the respect she was accorded when she contacted the organisers by phone to find out more and to get involved. After a while, she found the stream of activities too much to manage alongside other demands on her time and certain health issues. She asked them to stop mailing them, she was overwhelmed. However, they did not forget her contribution and contacted her to ask if the work she had completed could be part of the *Of Home and Hope* exhibition.

GK is currently reflecting deeply on what is important to her at this time of her life. Because she always gives herself wholeheartedly to anything she commits to, she needs to prioritise her time. Her sense of responsibility is strong – to the process of making and to the use of materials (don't waste!) as well as to those around her – her family and people she is working with. She wants to feel in control of her time and appreciates the flexibility within the Art by Post project, in terms of pace and time.

Through taking part in the Southbank project GK has found out about [Arts Depot](#) which is much closer to where she lives. She would like to be involved in artistic activity there, maybe leading some artistic activities herself. GK is an experienced ESOL³ teacher and talked about the possibility of sharing her creative skills with others in her community. She is very modest about her abilities and hesitates to describe herself as an artist. She has continued to develop her artistic skills through attending online arts classes run by her local Age UK.

As we write, she has had recent communication with the Southbank Centre and is very hopeful about exploring opportunities to extend her creative endeavours.

4. NAVRANG ARTS LEICESTER

"In terms of arts - loads of things were happening in temples, in the community. We wanted to bring these out and celebrate them. We started searching for artists, not professional artists, but people in the home who were doing things and who could actually teach others."

Member, Navrang Arts



Kampala event day.
Image: Navrang Arts

Navrang Arts is a voluntary arts organisation, run by creative people who are now aged over 50, that delivers visual arts and media based on Indian cultural heritage in the Leicester region. Their first project was in 1997 when they ran the first ever Bollywood Drive-in Cinema in the UK. Their aspiration is to establish a consistent programme of events to promote contemporary visual arts and media with a focus on Indian values through exhibition, education, training and participation. By no means under the radar in Leicester, with a string of successful arts projects under their 24 year belt, they have yet to achieve National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status from Arts Council England (ACE).

Initially, when we set up [...] we had great ambitions. But you realised very quickly that funding is not as accessible for a lot of the ethnically diverse organisations as it would be for the large theatres and museums and galleries and so on. I've also worked for the Arts Council. So I know this from the inside rather than just from the outside. Bharat Pandya, Chair, Navrang Arts

Navrang Arts has a history of working with an inter-disciplinary and inter-generational approach. This has brought them success with attracting funding for arts activity through the lens of heritage. In 2012, Navrang Arts, in partnership with Leicester City Council Arts and Museum Service, delivered a Heritage Lottery Fund Project called *Celebrating 40 years of Ugandan Asians in Leicester*. This captured and amplified the voices and achievement of a generation of South Asians who came to England as refugees from Uganda in the 1970s.

We knew very well that in 10 years, these people might not be around. So we specifically targeted them for their oral histories. Member, Navrang Arts

As part of the project, oral histories and objects signifying lives of Ugandan Asians were collected and a major exhibition was installed at the Leicester Museum & Art Gallery, *From Kampala to Leicester*.² Over 10 weeks over 50,000 visitors visited the exhibition and it attracted national³ and international interest through media coverage in Kenya, Uganda and India. An accompanying events programme included workshops, talks and film shows. A travelling exhibition was also created that toured schools, community centres and libraries in the city.



Photograph from exhibition *From Kampala to Leicester*. Image: Navrang Arts

1 Formerly known as the New Walk Museum

2 <http://www.navrangarts.com/from-kampala-to-leicester-exhibition.html>

3 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/we-re-all-together-how-leicester-became-model-multiculturalism-even-if-was-never-plan-8732691.html>

Legacies

From Kampala to Leicester is housed as a permanent exhibition at Leicester Museum and was the first permanent Asian history exhibition in Leicester. It is also an inclusive exhibition, as it forms part of The Story of Leicester.

Leicester today has what is regarded as one of the largest Diwali celebrations outside of India, but the festival had very humble origins back in the 1960s. *6000 Lights: The Story of Diwali in Leicester* (2016)⁴ told the rich story of the development of Diwali celebrations in Leicester with personal objects donated by the local community.

In terms of arts – loads of things were happening in temples, in the community. We wanted to bring these out and celebrate them. We started searching for artists, not professional artists, but people in the home who were doing things and who could actually teach others. Member, Navrang Arts

This ranged from crafts, textiles, Diwali card design and cooking to storytelling, dance and music. As a result the arts and museums service now has a database of local artists, most of whom would not have otherwise been on many other mainstream databases. Another important legacy is that the Diwali project has been archived at the [Leicester Records Office](http://www.recordoffice.org.uk/events-exhibitions-and-projects/projects/)⁵. During the pandemic 2020–21, Navrang Arts' *Life After Fifty* group has continued the Diwali themed arts workshops on zoom, sharing their skills with younger generations as well as their peers. They are also sharing stories and experiences around mental health to let agencies know about the needs of older south Asian people.

4 <http://www.navrangarts.com/6000-lights-the-story-of-diwali-in-leicester.html>

5 <http://www.recordoffice.org.uk/events-exhibitions-and-projects/projects/>

6 <https://www.darbar.org/festival/darbarfestival2021>



We want our needs to be met culturally in the way we would like to meet them.

Member, Navrang Arts

Legacies still to be fought for

It was about what is the project we want to do? Now let's find somebody who will fund this project and take it forward. So we've been successful in that respect, that we've done what was true to us in terms of what we wanted to achieve. It would have been very easy to just be chasing the money and become a completely different organisation. Member, Navrang Arts

Whilst there is something special about a group of volunteers creating ambitious projects, inspiring partners to support them and successfully raising funds to deliver them, for Navrang Arts it remains a disappointment that they did not receive any core funding to even employ a part-time member of staff who could support the team. They attribute their failure to access public arts funding to a lack of knowledge and understanding of South Asian art forms, whether popular, contemporary, folk or classical traditions, which has eliminated them from consideration by regional arts bodies. For example, the [Darbar Festival](https://www.darbar.org/festival/darbarfestival2021)⁶ started in Leicester in 2005, said Bharat, but 'had to move to London to get financial support'.

Coming next

Currently they await the outcome of a proposal to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for a major exhibition at Leicester Museum to celebrate 50 Years of Ugandan Asians in Leicester. This time there will be a focus on the stories of the children from Uganda who grew up in England, mostly now in their 50s and 60s, and their children. The older people in the community will be contacted via community and faith groups, South Asian TV and radio stations⁷ to collect objects for the exhibition, brought from Uganda.

In terms of partnership working their stance is now assertive and robust.

We've done all these years trying to tick other [ethnic minority] boxes. But we reached a stage where no, if it's partnership, we want genuine partnership, we're not going to just tick your boxes. [...] Partners have] got to be involved in it, they've got to put resources into it. They've got to open up their databases when we want to do the launch event and publicity event and all of that - the skills that they might have, which we don't always have, they've got to bring them to the table. Member, Navrang Arts

Navrang Arts certainly feel that they are at this better stage with Leicester Museum, especially after the *Celebrating 40 years of Ugandan Asians in Leicester* exhibition and its success. The City Mayor for Leicester, Peter Soulsby is a long-term supporter of Navrang Arts' work and has galvanised the whole process for the '50 Years' project. The City Mayor has the vision to see the importance for the community, for tourism and for opening up the city centre after successive pandemic lockdowns.

Suitable gallery space has been found in the museum and Culture Recovery Funding will also support some of the exhibition costs. The Navrang Arts members speculated about the fear of difference that large institutions have when it comes to large-scale work presented by people of colour.

I find it quite patronising that when it comes to the community things, 'We're OK, we'll react to that, whether we're an art service or museum service, but when it comes to anything, a bit more of magnitude, then we're a bit scared to have it.' [...] I still think it's this fear of, I don't know, these alien people taking over our museums.

Navrang Arts acknowledge that arts and heritage organisations have policies to address diversity and inclusion, (lots of them!), but what needs to change is the leadership. They would like to see more leaders who buy in to the things that need to happen in order to address structural inequalities and discrimination. Policy makers also need to examine criteria for funding and look through a wider lens for their definitions of culture and heritage in terms of forms of expression and timeframes.

And how we do it. I don't know, there are national museums, who could lead the way, national art galleries, and some of them have done some excellent work. There's great work going on in Birmingham. But I guess it takes a black leader to do that.

7 For example Sabras Radio, Sanskar Radio

Projection at the British Library.
Image: Stuart Keegan, Bloomsbury Festival



5. SOUL CITY ARTS BIRMINGHAM

What is most rewarding is that they had never had anyone approach them to hear the stories they had bottled up and the experience was very emotional and overwhelming for some but certainly rewarding for all. Mohammed Ali, Artistic Director

This film and photography project features Bangladeshi elders, mainly men, and was led by a mid-career Bangladeshi artist,

[Soul City Arts](#) creates powerful artistic encounters to transform people and place. They use the arts to take audiences on a shared journey towards dialogue and understanding. They believe that a healthy society needs to enable people to express themselves boldly and confidently with authenticity and to enter into open and honest conversation. The arts enable people to celebrate their communities and give a voice to social and political perspectives that are often unheard.

Soul City Arts' founding artist Mohammed Ali celebrated the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh at the Bloomsbury Festival, October 2021, bringing life to the facades of the Holy Cross Church and the British Library with a compelling film projection telling the stories of early Bangladeshi migrants. The interviews and photographic portraits portray the life and journeys of the men (and some women) who left Bangladesh at a time of political turmoil in the 1970s. They speak of the struggles, the hardships and the joys of making a new home in a foreign land.

These perspectives are of the everyday Londoners, who we may brush shoulders against, yet never hear stories from. Bloomsbury Festival website

This work was commissioned by the [Bloomsbury Festival](#) as part of their wider three year heritage project [Visible People, Visible Places](#), which has a strong inter-generational aspect and includes a photographic exhibition and community archive material [Bengal to Camden](#). All of this work was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund with support from Camden Council and King's Cross Brunswick Neighbourhood Association.

Engaging with older Bangladeshi men – language and trust

Soul City's Artistic Director Mohammed Ali told us that the older men they engaged with had not to their knowledge been involved in arts activity before. Rajpal and Mohammed framed the project as a legacy of historical significance for the current and future generations, that they need to know about their 'struggle' and the 'hardships' they had endured. "This excited them immediately," said Mohammed.

Whilst much of the work with older participants during this research has engaged mainly women and has been led by women (and indeed more widely across the creative ageing sector¹), this arts project is male-led and perhaps not surprisingly has therefore connected well with a group of older men. Mohammed, a fluent Sylheti speaker connected with local communities through past associations and support from Junna Begum, Cultural Heritage Project Manager at Bloomsbury Festival.

In particular he had with him during the interviews someone whose late-father was a well-known member of the community from back in the 1960's. That helped build trust and respect. Mohammed Ali, Artistic Director, Soul City Arts

It was also a challenge initially to get the older men to attend the sessions. Mohammed attributes this to the success of the satellite TV channels. In the last 15 years ethnic satellite broadcasting has played an important role in these communities, a kind of community service where people receive news from Bangladesh and share announcements such as family bereavements. However, although engaged by Mohammed's project, the elders had got so used to staying at home in their bubbles, they had lost the need and the habit of going to community centres and the mosque, 'getting engaging in satellite TV, right there. They just can literally stay at home and still feel connected with the motherland'.

Gathering the stories for the film

Rajpal and Mohammed describe the process of gathering the stories as 'heart-warming and equally heart-breaking' to hear in their own words and language what had transpired over the years.

Once we were able to gain their trust we had them captivated. What is most rewarding is that they had never had anyone approach them to hear the stories they had bottled up and the experience was very emotional and overwhelming for some but certainly rewarding for all. Mohammed Ali

For the artists, (in their 40s) the learning from the elders was profound. They learnt 'everything about trust, faith, strength, courage, overcoming fears, heartbreak, longing, loss and gain.' For the participants, they think that the greatest impact for them was being given the opportunity to share these life-changing experiences, experiences that they have not shared openly. This in itself was a process of reflection for all concerned.

Legacy

Legacy is something that Mohammed and Rajpal are very passionate about and there are several strands to Soul City's vision. Whilst projecting *Bangladeshi Tales from Kings Cross* onto the British Library makes an important culturally symbolic, powerful and political statement to the wider community, that event did not carry the same social kudos for the participants. So the legacy has to be significant and relevant for the community sharing stories as well as for mainstream/other audiences. Broadcast is the next step in Mohammed's vision for *Bangladeshi Tales*.

You tell that community that you will broadcast that film on Channel S² on Bangla TV, that's the thing that excites them. Mohammed Ali

Soul City Arts see the elders of the South Asian community as visionaries who when they came to the UK established the cultural hubs of places of worship - mosques, temples and gurdwaras. However for the new diaspora communities of the second, third and fourth generations, the new hubs are the arts and culture hubs.

They need to be established so that future generations are able to identify and connect with their identity, their culture and their heritage, not through these places of worship, (they're still necessary), but now through the arts. Mohammed Ali

¹ [On Diversity and Creative Ageing, Baring Foundation](#) Page 6: 'Women tend to participate in arts and cultural activities more than men. At the same time, more older men than women over 50 report moderate to high levels of social isolation, especially those without a partner. Age UK's research suggests that men find it harder to access social support, sometimes because of a lack of activities that interest them. (Age UK, 'Older men in the margins' project 2016-2019. www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/ older-men-at-the-margins-how-men-combat-loneliness-in-later-life.

² <https://chsuk.tv/index.html>



Mangagariya dance from *Shakuntala*,
Image: Jayraj Sangreachka

6. SUBRANG ARTS CROYDON

I think it's really important to keep this culture alive. And the only way to do it is to promote it, and make it accessible to as many people as possible. Harsha Amin, choreographer

This story describes how women in their 50s and 60s play a pivotal role working with people of all ages and in particular across the different older age groups.

'Subrang' means spectrum of colours and it represents the rich cultural heritage of India. [Subrang Arts](#) is a Registered Charity, a Not-for-Profit voluntary organisation dedicated to the promotion and development of South Asian Art and Culture.

Subrang Arts combines education and entertainment, organising cultural programmes, exhibitions, heritage projects, music concerts, talks, lectures and demonstrations.

Recently they took part in Brent London Borough of Culture 2020, *Roots and Changes –Gujarati Influences*.¹ This was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Sewa, meaning 'selfless service', is a value that is a way of life for many Hindus and Sikhs. The women in Subrang Arts talked about how through the arts they were able to give back to their community and contribute to civic life. Volunteering is therefore an important part of the organisation's purpose, with project funds raised to pay for any visiting artists, materials, services and running costs.

1 <http://www.subrangarts.co.uk/events>

Gujarati Yatra

We visit Subrang Arts in Croydon on a cold November afternoon. The church hall is laid out for an arts workshop and the tables are surrounded with around 25 women, all in their 50s and 60s. They are here for a batik workshop led by [Kinetika](https://kinetika.co.uk/)², whose silk flags and banners have inspired Subrang Arts to create a set of their own. These will tell the story of the Gujarati diaspora from India to East Africa, UK and North America. This develops the theme of their heritage exhibition in 2018 *Gujarati Yatra* – “*We came with empty hands; we left with empty hearts*”³ The space thrums with energy as the women set to work drawing their designs and experimenting with the wax and dyes. Chairperson Lata Desai has arranged for Nayna, Harsha, Hina, Smita and Jigisha to speak to us, who all share their various creative skills with others as part of Subrang’s work. This is what they told us.

Intergenerational bridging

Harsha, like Lata, has been a key figure in the development of Subrang Arts for the past 30 years. Like the other women, she is in an age group in the middle of the generations. In terms of working with younger people, it’s about ensuring that the heritage of the culture and the art forms are kept alive. For the older generations, sharing skills and performances are about triggering deeply rooted memories of childhood and the enjoyment of their cultural identity.

When they came in the 60s, 70s, the arts were not prominent at all, everybody was very busy just making ends meet. [...] that’s when the arts really got lost because there was no time for them. And those who were in the art field couldn’t really give their time and make a living out of it. So that was not going to happen either, so it did get lost. Harsha, member and choreographer Subrang Arts

Subrang’s dance and music performances are spectacular, with costume designs by Nayna Chhatralia and materials and accessories sourced directly on trips to India. Harsha is as passionate about folk dances as she is about classical dance forms. She teaches a wide range of Gujarati folk dances, not just the more widely known Garba but also Morbani, Limbdi Gaame, Supdi, Chelaji Re, Tippani. A performance of these dances, mainly by women 55+ can be viewed [here](#).⁴

When I work with folk dances, I absolutely love working with older age groups because they connect to it so much. Yes. And you know that that whole energy, it becomes different. Harsha Amin, member and choreographer, Subrang Arts

Working across the generations is an immensely productive approach for Harsha. The older women have depth of expression in their movement and the young ones bring energy that drives everyone, ‘they feed off each other’.



Beaded vase by Nayna Chhatralia.
Image: Regilal Sathyadevan

2 <https://kinetika.co.uk/>

3 <https://www.migrationmuseum.org/gujarati-yatra-we-came-with-empty-hands-we-left-with-empty-hearts/>

4 Heritage Celebration: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6eoBoxjCgA>

Connecting with cultural heritage

Nayna Chhatralia was trained in the traditional craft of beadwork from the age of seven years old in her home city of Rajkot. Out of school hours she worked with her mother to make decorative items to sell in order to support the family. Now she makes things for friends and family and to exhibit, for example as part of an installation for Subrang's *Roots and Changes* exhibition.

Interestingly, Nayna does not think her older Gujarati peers appreciate her craft as much as the younger generations do. She thinks that she can't sell the larger scale work she makes for a price that recognises the time it takes to make. However younger people want to learn the craft and she thinks it is important to pass on her traditional skills, while she still has her physical dexterity.

This creative expression brings her pride and deep satisfaction. What Nayna especially values now is the opportunity to exhibit her work in galleries and museums. Having shown her work in Croydon Museum and in Brent Museum she would like to share her art more widely.

For Smita Patel, taking part in creative activities is an opportunity to connect with her cultural heritage and grow her appreciation of it. She was born in East Africa, as were her parents and she had a sense of disconnection with India's arts and culture. She has learnt about Lippa art using clay and mirrors and made several pieces for the *Roots and Changes* exhibition.⁵ Hina Amin also values Subrang Arts' advocacy of traditional Indian crafts because it 'keeps her culture alive. In addition to folk dances, she has learnt traditional embroidery skills from a textile artist recruited by Lata. Jigisha Patel learnt embroidery and how to make clothes from her mother. She then studied fashion design in India when she also learnt tie and dye techniques such as *bandhani*, and block printing. She has also shared these skills during Subrang Arts' workshops.

[Embroidery with] mirror work is quite a Gujarati talent. And a couple of the ladies within the group knew how to do that, because [...] they'd spent a big chunk of their time in India. And so they taught us how to do it. Hina Amin, member of Subrang Arts

⁵ Lippa art is a clay art form from the state of Gujarat, India. It is mostly done by the village women from Kutch to decorate their homes. Traditionally lippa is made by adding mud and cow dung and done on the walls.

FOR SMITA PATEL, TAKING PART IN CREATIVE ACTIVITIES IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONNECT WITH HER CULTURAL HERITAGE AND GROW HER APPRECIATION OF IT.

Language & migration

Hina believes that language plays an important role in communicating knowledge and cultural nuance. Older members of the group in their late 70s and 80s speak a little English but prefer Gujarati, whereas Hina and all the women who are in their 50s and 60s are bi-lingual. However their children can understand Gujarati but not read or write it, although a few have studied it to GCSE level.

We came to London in 1968. My mum and dad often used to say to me that they thought by the time we were of marriageable age [...] that we wouldn't speak in Gujarati, we would have lost our culture. So I think this is the last generation where we've managed to hold on to it as a whole. Most people in our generation are interested in our culture. Hina Amin, member of Subrang Arts

Whilst Nayna and Smita described appreciation of their work by younger generations, Hina's experience is different, she finds that in her family there is a lack of interest in cultural heritage and more assimilation into the British mainstream. She sees this as a loss within our culturally diverse society:

We've lost something that's so valuable if we only have one culture. [...] That comes with migration, and it'll get more and more diluted, because our children's children will be even that much more removed. Hina Amin, member of Subrang Arts



Legacy and inter-cultural collaboration

Subrang Arts' ambition for sharing and developing both the practice and appreciation of Indian art forms embraces partnerships that are local and regional and increasingly, mainstream and national ones. The British Museum lent Subrang Arts some artefacts for *Roots and Changes* and from this a collaborative project is being planned for 2022. The curator involved, Dr Sushma Jansari, has been seconded to the new [South Asia Gallery at Manchester Museum](#)⁶. The exhibitions and performances in London and Manchester to date have demonstrated that there is an appetite amongst South Asian communities and the wider British public.

For example, Jigisha has been part of [Bharatiya Vrund Gaan – The Indian Choir](#)⁷ since 2014, directed by Rakesh Joshi. The repertoire includes folk and seasonal songs and religious chants sung in different Indian languages. They have performed in Manchester via their partnership with The Choral Leadership Network, which is based at the Hallé in Manchester and brings together the experience and expertise of a number of partners from across the country involved in choral activity and training. Subrang also recently collaborated with London Mozart Players for a performance at Fairfield Halls, Croydon [Peace and Harmony](#)⁸. The choreographer for this performance was Harsha Amin.

6 <https://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/about/hellofuture/southasiagallery/>

7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_ml7XvpFgM and also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pV20_Af23zo

8 <https://www.fairfield.co.uk/events/peace-and-harmony-21>

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| Ruksana Begum | Arts Officer, London Borough Tower Hamlets |
| Rosemary Richards and Junna Begum | Bloomsbury Festival |
| Atiha Chaudry JP DL | Chair GM BAME Network & Associate of MBMEN CIC |
| Natanya Mark | Creative Lives |
| Lata Desai | Subrang Arts |
| Indi Sandhu | Essex Cultural Diversity Project |
| Saad Eddine Said | Home Slough |
| Emma Horsman | Cultural Spring |
| Rob Hunter | Leicester Ageing Together (Chair) |
| Imrana Mahmood | Creative Producer |
| Orchestras Live | |
| Binna Shah and Maiuri Chandaria | Oshwal |
| Raksha Patel | Visual Artist |
| Nisha Popat | Museum and Arts Consultant |
| Ali Pretty | Kinetika |
| Padma Rao | Sangini |
| Revoluton Arts | |
| Ranjan Saujan & Bharat Pandya | Navrang Arts |
| Asma Shohid | Sirjoni |
| Keranjeet Kaur Virdee | South Asian Arts UK |
| Manjit Singh | HASWA |
| Thanks also to Rebecca Timmis, Research Assistant | |

FURTHER READING

Reports

On Diversity and Creative Ageing 2020

<https://baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/on-diversity-and-creative-ageing>

See also:

Art & Dementia in the UK South Asian Diaspora 2019

https://cdn.baringfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BF_Art-dementia-in-UK-SA-Diaspora_Main-report_WEB.pdf

Age Against the Machine Festival report 2020

<https://www.thealbany.org.uk/news/age-against-the-machine-evaluation-report>

Ageing in Place for Minority Communities

<https://www.gmcvo.org.uk/publications/ageing-place-minority-ethnic-communities-importance-social-infrastructure>

An Equalities approach to programme design

<https://www.gmcvo.org.uk/system/files/publications/Toolkit%20for%20Inclusion%20in%20Practice%20-%20Briefing.pdf>

Ethnic Minority Older People, Histories of Structural Racism and the COVID-19 Pandemic

https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/205973173/Runnymede_COVID_Older_people_briefing_FINAL.pdf

Mapping and working with marginalised communities

<https://www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/sites/default/files/Mapping%20and%20working%20with%20marginalised%20communities%20Workbook.pdf>

Centre for Cultural Value: Covid 19 findings

<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/the-team/covid-19-research-project/#emerging>

Understanding ethnic inequalities in later life: Disseminating findings through video

<https://blog.ukdataservice.ac.uk/understanding-ethnic-inequalities-in-later-life/>

Books

Empireland by [Sathnam Sanghera](#)

The Artist in Time - A Generation of great British Creatives by Chris Fite-Wassilak, commissioned by Baring Foundation [Bloomsbury Publishing](#)

Background research

Rangoli

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangoli>

Northumbria University symposium

<https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/news-events/news/whose-heritage>

Tate Britain

<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/chila-kumari-singh-burman>

<https://www.dezeen.com/2020/11/16/chila-kumari-singh-burman-tate-britain-remembering-brave-new-world>

National Academy of Social Prescribing

[National Academy of Social Prescribing](#)

Akash Radio

<http://akashradioleeds.co.uk/about-us>

Creative Muslim Women by Saskia Warren

<https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/creative-muslim-women-uk>

Media

Nitin Sawhney CBE, Musician and Composer

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w3ct1n69>

<https://www.nitinsawhney.com>

BBC iPlayer/ Nitin Sawhney CBE, Musician and Composer

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m0010602/hardtalk-nitin-sawhney-musician-and-composer>

Evening Standard/Chila Burman/ Artist

<https://www.standard.co.uk/insider/chila-kumari-burman-artist-covent-garden-tiger-b958067.html> (image)

The Guardian/Judith Mackrell

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/jan/12/theatre-leader-pooja-ghai-i-couldnt-sit-back-and-complain-about-roles-i-wasnt-getting>

The Independent /Multiculturalism in Britain

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk>this-britain/we-re-all-together-how-leicester-became-model-multiculturalism-even-if-was-never-plan-8732691.html>

The Guardian / Pravesh Kumar Founder Rifco Theatre Company

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/jan/08/people-of-colour-senior-theatre-roles-pravesh-kumar>

The Guardian / Pooja Ghai Artistic Director Tamasha Theatre Company

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/jan/12/theatre-leader-pooja-ghai-i-couldntsit-back-and-complain-about-roles-i-wasntgetting>

Instagram: [_dadimas](#) Dr Geeta (PhD) Dadima's CIC

Events

Royal College of Art,

[Design Age Institute Seminar: 'Age, Agency & Joy'](#)
[27 April 2021](#)

Akram Khan Company

[Chotto Xenos](#)

Dawinder Bansal: Asian Women & Cars exhibition

[https://www.blastphotofestival.com/artist/dawinderbansal](#)

Annual celebration of South Asian heritage July/August

[https://www.southasianheritage.org.uk](#)

ORGANISATIONS

Arts Centre Washington

[Arts Centre Washington](#)

Arts Depot

[Arts Depot](#)

Bloomsbury Festival

<https://www.bloomsbury.com/ca/artist-in-time-9781789940350>

Creative People Places Network

<https://www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk>

Culture Health & Wellbeing

<https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk>

Essex Changing CPP

[Essex Changing](#)

Hearts for the Arts

<https://forthearts.org.uk/campaigns/hearts-for-the-arts>

Iniva

<https://iniva.org>

Kinetika

<https://kinetika.co.uk/>

Leicester Museum & Art Gallery

[Leicester Museum & Art Gallery](#)

Manchester Museum

<https://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/about/hellofuture/southasiagallery>

Migration Museum

<https://www.migrationmuseum.org/gujarati-yatra-we-came-with-empty-hands-we-left-with-empty-hearts>

Museum Detox

[Museum Detox](#)

Pulse Connects

<http://pulseconnects.com>

Queens Theatre Hornchurch

[Queens Theatre Hornchurch](#)

Sunderland Culture

[Sunderland Culture](#)

The Cultural Spring

<http://theculturalspring.org.uk>

APPENDIX 1

Research Questions and methodology

Research questions for the overall project

1. What are the **positive ways to bring about systemic change** in the behaviour of arts organisations, artists and potential funders when considering arts projects for, by and with older people from ethnically diverse communities, so that their approach is genuine, inclusive and caring?
2. **How can CADA connect** with organisations where good practice with South Asian older people is taking place?
3. **How can CADA learn** from them and recognise, appreciate and celebrate their contribution to creative ageing?
4. Who are these community organisations working with already and what kind of **further networks/partnerships** would they like to be part of?

Methodology

1. **Desk research.** Contacted 31 organisations/ key individuals and 24 responded. Identified and contacted 42 artists, 33 took part in the research. Viewed film and written content on over a dozen websites.
2. **Attendance** at online events and conferences:
 - Online Artists' talk as part of the Sangini/ Srijoni exhibition programme at Washington Art Gallery, 29 June 2021
 - Dawinder Bansal's film and discussion *Asian Women and Cars : Road to Independence*, 16 September 2021¹.
 - Bangladesh 50 events as part of Bloomsbury Festival in Cromer St and at British Library, 16/17 October 2021
 - Older People & Cultural Engagement: Current perspectives led by CADA in partnership with The Audience Agency, Tuesday 19 October 2021
 - Workshop at Subrang Arts, Croydon, 27 November 2021
3. **Conversations** with ten South Asian-led community and cultural organisations, both the organisers and project participants. (25 individuals in total). Half of these groups are run mainly on a voluntary basis and are located in Havering, Manchester, Tyne & Wear, Leeds, Luton, Slough, Birmingham, Croydon and Leicester. Reflecting the scale of resources available for this research, these groups were identified through CADA and the researchers professional and personal networks. The interviews were conducted via zoom. The organisations interviewed for the Six Stories were offered a donation for their time.
4. **Online survey** of artists aged 55+. 42 artists were contacted and 33 responded. As above, the artists were identified through the researchers' personal and professional networks.
5. **Follow-up questionnaires** to a representative sample of 12 in total (i.e. 11/ 33 artists surveyed, plus one other artist whose comments during our interview connected directly with the key survey findings. The artists were selected on the basis of geographic spread in England, identities, art form, and context for their work. Participants were paid an honorarium for their time.
6. **Interviews** with two South Asian arts organisations, SAA-UK, Leeds and Soul City Arts, Birmingham
7. **Interviews** with individual artists and cultural workers x 5

¹ The film celebrates the lives and experiences of first generation South Asian migrant women living in the UK. In this short film, Dawinder explores the relationships between the women and how driving enabled them to live richer lives. The film highlights the positive impact of these stories on future generations of British Asian women who now benefit from the sacrifices of the first generation who battled against patriarchy and traditional family structures to gain independence. Dawinder Bansal

APPENDIX 2

Visionary Artists: Facts and figures

Place, faith, identity, art forms, routes into the arts; settings for work with South Asian communities; experience, skills and training for working with older people; networks.

Survey responses

33 artists responded to the invitation to participate, which was sent to 42 artists in total. 31 artists completed the survey in full.

2.1 Countries and languages

The artists were born in:

South Asia (22): India x 13, Bangladesh x 9

East Africa (8): Tanzania x 3, Kenya x 3, Mauritius x 1, not specified x 1

Europe: England x 2, Yugoslavia x 1

The artists grew up in:

| | |
|--|---|
| India | 9 |
| Bangladesh | 8 |
| England (incl. Hull, Lake District, London, Warwickshire, Norfolk) | 6 |
| East Africa (as indicated: Uganda, Tanzania, Mombasa, Nairobi, Kenya) | 6 |
| England plus one other place (Iran and Tanzania) | 2 |
| Pakistan (Lahore) | 1 |

The artists came to live in England:

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| Born in UK (1960s) | 2 |
| During 1950s | 1 |
| During 1960s | 5 |
| During 1970s | 10 |
| During 1980s | 10 |
| During 1990s | 3 |
| During 2000s | 2 |

Current residence:

11 people live in the following England locations, Birmingham, Essex, Leicester, Liverpool, Slough, Suffolk, Sunderland, Yorkshire Dales. 9 live in various inner London boroughs and

5 live in Outer London boroughs.

Languages spoken:

- English x 33 (18 as first language indicated, 9 as second)
- Bengali/Bangla x 13 (8 as first language indicated). One person also added Sylheti in addition to Bangla)
- Hindi x 20 (2 as first language indicated, 9 as second)
- Punjabi x 12 (1 as first language indicated, 6 as second)
- Urdu x 11 (2 as first language indicated)
- French x 5
- Gujarati x 3
- Other languages x 1 each: Telegu, Marathi (as first language indicated) Swahili, Arabic, Sanskrit and German

The survey participants speak or have knowledge of 14 different languages between them. There are five people who speak five languages. Most (23) speak or have an understanding of three languages. One participant speaks only English. This person identifies as an English Pakistani.

32 participants speak English, 18 as their first language. Bengali/Bangla is the second dominant first language with 13 indicating it first. One person also speaks Sylheti.² One person understands Bengali but can't speak it.

² It is variously perceived as either a [dialect of Bengali](#) or a language in its own right. While most linguists consider it an independent language, for many native speakers Sylheti forms the [diglossic vernacular](#), with [standard Bengali](#) forming the [codified lect](#). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sylheti_language

Hindi is the second most known language but indicated first by only two participants. Nine people speak it as their second language, seven as their third. Punjabi is indicated second by six participants and third by three interviewees, two of whom identify as British Asian. Urdu is spoken to some degree by one third of all the participating artists but only by two as a first language. Six people indicated it as their third language. Of these, five identify as of Indian origin or descent but one now identifies as a black woman of Indian heritage.

Other languages spoken include (1 each): Marathi (as first language indicated) Swahili, Telugu, (the latter two are third languages) Sanskrit and German. Four speak some French, one of whom also speaks French Patois. One person can read but not speak Arabic.

2.2 Identity, how do you tell it?

Countries and place

Of the 33 artists surveyed, 13 indicate '**British**' as part of their identity but it is complex and they do not always see themselves as British in equal measure to the other nationalities indicated. Two indicate dual heritage as South Asian/UK and English /Pakistani mixed. The British identities were described variously as British Asian, British Indian, British Bangladeshi and for one, '**British by chance and nomadic at heart**'.

13 indicated '**Indian**' in their identity description. Other identities (7) reflective of place are all Indian: Punjabi (4), and West Bengal, Marathi, Gujarati, (all 1 each). Two people wrote that they were born in Africa of Indian origin. Five people identify as Bangladeshi', of whom three specifically included Sylhet. One person indicates '**Pakistani by migration**'.

Faith

Seven people indicate '**Hindu**'. Of this Hindu group, four indicated Indian heritage, two have Bangladeshi roots, two indicate that they are non-orthodox or secular. One person also indicates their Brahmin caste. One person (who doesn't state Hindu as an identity) has an in-depth knowledge of Sanskrit and Indian philosophy.

Five artists include '**Muslim**' in their description of their identities. For one person, this is the single identity indicated. One person wrote: Muslim, Londoner/British, Mauritian in that order. My criterion is from Islamic teachings.

Four people indicate that they are **Sikh** as part of their identity. One cites **Buddhism** as their faith and another is influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. Two people describe themselves as '**spiritual**', e.g. Indian by birth, Pakistani by migration, British by chance... nomadic at heart and spiritual.

Other descriptions

Notably, two participants describe themselves using other criteria. One artist identifies themselves as 'colour'. For one, their black female identity is key:

By birth I am of Indian heritage, now I identify myself as a Black woman of Indian heritage. My female identity is very important for me, however, the languages, music, memories and sensibilities which I have inherited by virtue of my birth in India help define my heritage and hence, my identity in the wider context around race, ethnicity, migration and displacement.

2.3 Forms of artistic expression

As the chart below shows, over 50% (16 people) indicate theatre and 50% indicate literature. Fine art and film / TV come next, indicated at 42% (13 people for each). Of the 31 who responded, a third (10 people / 32.26%) ticked 'Other'.

| | | | |
|---|-------------|-----|----|
| 1 | Theatre | 52% | 16 |
| 2 | Literature | 52% | 16 |
| 3 | Fine Art | 42% | 13 |
| 4 | Film/TV | 42% | 13 |
| 5 | Music | 39% | 12 |
| 6 | Live Art | 32% | 10 |
| 7 | Dance | 26% | 8 |
| 8 | Photography | 23% | 7 |
| 9 | Other | 32% | 10 |

(31/33 responses)

Six people practice one art form. In all other cases, respondents ticked multiple forms and often expanded on these. Art forms and artistic expressions listed in 'other' include storytelling, blogging, journalism, working with circus artists, animation, traditional Indian art forms, (e.g. Kathak dance, rangoli ³), glass, fashion and textiles, jewellery design and community arts.

My expressive drivers are not limited to a certain medium, to get ideas across to create and at times co-create moments of welcome in which stories can be told or exchanged.

Involvement in community arts and arts education is a common thread as is the sharing of practice in formal education settings and informally through participatory practice. The intention to be a 'catalyst' to create new stories, new audiences and new methods of representation is a repeated theme..

My creative practice as a theatre maker has always been embedded in research and dialogue with communities so that the final piece of work is resonant with the people whose stories are being explored.

Traditional art forms are represented, notably in dance and fine art / arts and crafts mediums. Several describe working across art form disciplines.

I am a south Asian dance practitioner specialising Indian creative dance (Uday Shankar style⁴) I also produce multicultural cross-arts performances and deliver workshops on dance and culture to a wide range of participants of all ages, with or without disability.

Several artists write about proactively being promoters and advocates of their work. There is a significant theme of freedom and not wanting to be boxed, limited or pigeonholed. Creative mediums are viewed as interconnected.

I am currently working with outdoor immersive art expressions. I work with the fine arts holistically. Every creative medium is interconnected for me. As a producer and director, I prefer to keep myself out of any boxes and boundaries.

³ Rangoli is an art form in which patterns are created on the floor or a tabletop using materials such as powdered limestone, red ochre, dry rice flour, coloured sand, quartz powder, flower petals, and coloured rocks. It is an everyday practice in Hindu households, however the colours are preferred during festivals and other important celebrations as it is time consuming. Designs are passed from one generation to the next, keeping both the art form and the tradition alive. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangoli>

⁴ Uday Shankar (8 December 1900 – 26 September 1977) was an [Indian dancer](#) and choreographer, best known for creating a fusion style of dance, adapting European theatrical techniques to [Indian classical dance](#), imbued with elements of Indian classical, folk, and tribal dance, which he later popularised in India, Europe, and the United States in 1920s and 1930s. He was a pioneer of [modern dance](#) in India.

2.4 Routes into the arts

I have worked with the best talents and mentors in the creative sector. They all have been my gurus. Also, tens of short and long professional development courses over the past 30 years have trained me to become myself.

Those surveyed have come to the arts through several routes. Whilst a substantial number have had formal training or experienced higher study in arts subject, several have taught themselves or trained informally alongside other study. Some have received other training, e.g. in teaching skills, storytelling, along the way. Artists were asked to indicate all the options that applied to them.

| Training and qualifications: please indicate all those that apply to you. | | | | |
|---|--|-----|----|--|
| 1 | University degree (arts and humanities) | 42% | 13 | |
| 2 | University degree (non arts subject) | 32% | 10 | |
| 3 | University/conservatoire degree or diploma in drama, music, dance, film, photography, fine art | 23% | 7 | |
| 4 | Specialist art form training (e.g. with a dance guru) | 19% | 6 | |
| 5 | None of the above | 19% | 6 | |

(31/33 responses)

| What was your main route into practising/becoming an artist? Please indicate one of the following: | | | | |
|---|---|-----|----|--|
| 1 | Self employment/freelance | 52% | 17 | |
| 2 | Activism | 18% | 6 | |
| 3 | Other | 15% | 5 | |
| 4 | Training +professional experience with a company/venue/promoter/sponsor/ patron | 12% | 4 | |
| 5 | Apprenticeship/on the job training | 3% | 1 | |

(33/33 responses)

My aunt taught me embroidery skills as a child that inspired me to take this practice further as a hobby. Later I learnt more about pathways and progression routes and opportunities open to me to advance my studies and interests. [] becoming self-employed did not prepare me fully for a career as an artist, it did pave the way to becoming an artist, which was not planned.

I would like to tick all the above options. Since each of these became a catalyst to move at one or the other stage of my artistic life.

Self-employment was the main route into the arts, followed by activism. Given the age range surveyed this isn't surprising, especially when we consider the artists early-career years in UK against the backdrop of racism and the anti-racist movement, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. One artist simply states 'racism' as their route into the arts.

Six indicated specific activist roles:

I am a 1971 freedom fighter.¹

I have been involved in the arts in Britain since 1978, mostly working on the fringes, mainstream TV and as an activist.

I have created banners for Southall Black Sisters featured at the British Library.

I am passionate about women's issues and equality, and through my work I explore/investigate the role and status of women in our current society, especially within the South Asian diaspora.

¹ NB This artist is Bangladeshi and refers to the 1971 Liberation War between former East and West Pakistan. The Bangladesh Liberation War, also known as the Bangladesh War of Independence, or simply the Liberation War in Bangladesh, was a revolution and armed conflict sparked by the rise of the Bengali nationalist and self-determination movement in what was then East Pakistan during the 1971 Bangladesh genocide. [Wikipedia](#)

2.5 Settings for work with South Asian communities

Community settings where the artists surveyed have worked with South Asian participants. This extensive list drawn from the survey demonstrates the range of places and contexts covering several decades.

N.B. Some of these organisations no longer exist. We did not have the capacity as part of this research to further investigate locations or classify those listed here.

| | |
|--|---|
| 1 A Season of Bangla Drama, Tower Hamlets | 28 Customs House, South Shields |
| 2 Action Village Madras / India | 29 Day Centres |
| 3 Akademi (Academy of Indian Dance) | 30 Dhrupad Music Society |
| 4 Akash House, Camden | 31 Drake Music special needs project with schools at Rich Mix |
| 5 American School, Belgium | 32 East London Mela |
| 6 APDA Harlesden | 33 Edinburgh Festival fringe |
| 7 Arc, Stockton | 34 EKTA Arts, Newham |
| 8 Art at Intersection, Sussex | 35 Euston Hub |
| 9 Arts Asia | 36 Friend's Haaarth – The Music Room (Wembley) |
| 10 Arts Centre, Washington, Tyne & Wear | 37 Ghar se Ghar Luton |
| 11 Asar Sikh Day Centre | 38 Global Music events (especially in Europe and America) |
| 12 Association of Blind Asians | 39 Golden Hearts (researched at St George's Hospital) |
| 13 Baishaki Mela (several, eg in Lambeth, Newham, Tower Hamlets) | 40 Gujarati Ladies Group |
| 14 Bangladeshi Community Centre | 41 Gurdwaras |
| 15 Beck Theatre, Hayes | 42 Gypsy Traveller Community, Cranford Community College |
| 16 Belgrave Baheno Women's Centre, Leicester | 43 Haveli Women's Group |
| 17 Bengal Foundation | 44 Heritage Project (Ugandan Asians) |
| 18 Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan | 45 Hindu Caribbean Society |
| 19 Birmingham Drum | 46 Hindu Temples (Liverpool, Sheffield) |
| 20 Bolton Octagon Theatre | 47 Home Slough |
| 21 Brady Arts and Community Centre | 48 Humara Ghur, Newham |
| 22 Brick Lane Circle | 49 Ismaili Centre |
| 23 Care Homes | 50 Jadavpur University |
| 24 Castle Festival, Nottingham | 51 Jain Bhagini group |
| 25 CIO lunch club (Abbey Park festival, Leicester) | 52 Kala Sangam |
| 26 Community Centres | |
| 27 Community venues, India, Preston, Norwich | |

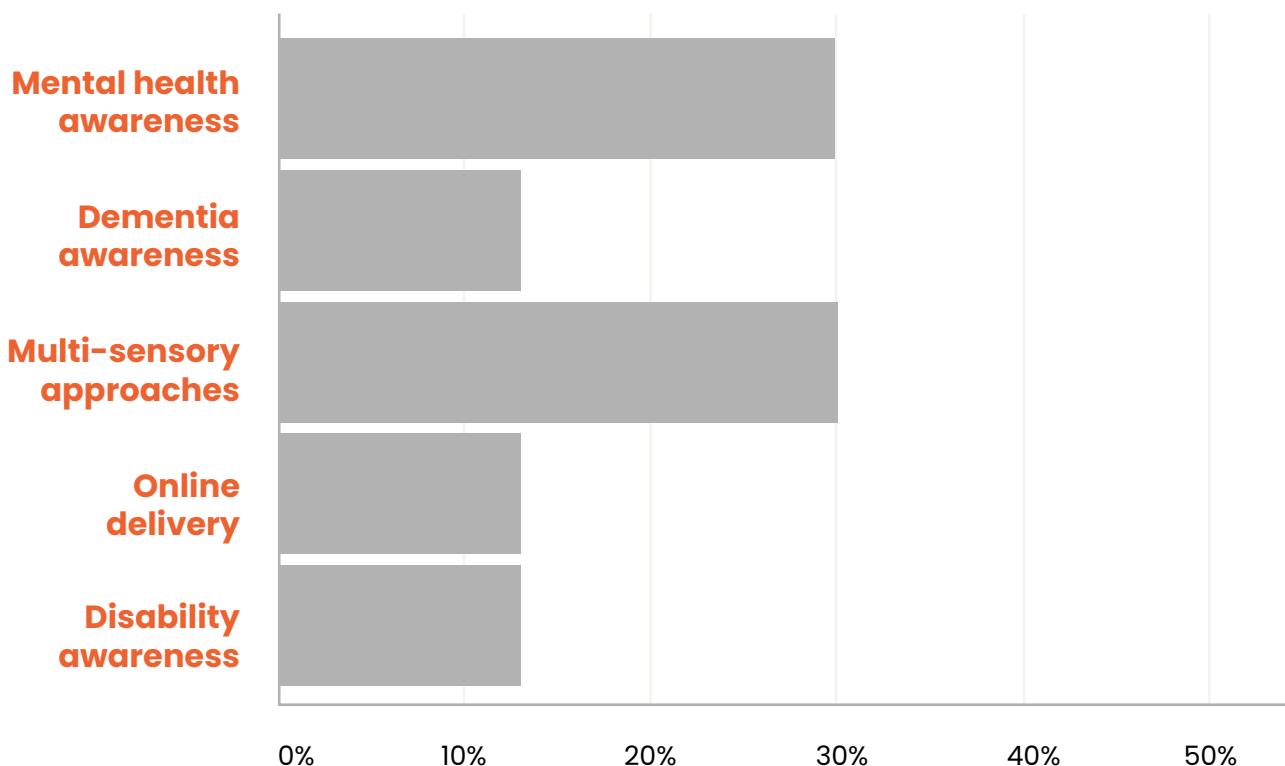
| | | | |
|----|--|-----|---|
| 53 | Kali Theatre | 79 | Schools |
| 54 | Leicester Theatres | 80 | ShivaNova |
| 55 | Little Angel Theatre | 81 | South Asian Arts UK |
| 56 | London Hospital (unspecified) | 82 | Southall (care homes) |
| 57 | Magic Me | 83 | Southall Black Sisters |
| 58 | Melbourne University | 84 | Southbank Centre, London |
| 59 | Migration and Refugee Groups, Sussex University | 85 | Spare Tyre Leeds |
| 60 | Mitali Arts Group | 86 | Sujata Banerjee Dance Company |
| 61 | Moat Community Centre, Leicester | 87 | Sunderland Culture |
| 62 | Motiroti | 88 | Sunderland Museum and Winter Garden |
| 63 | Music for Change | 89 | Tagore Centre UK |
| 64 | Muslim Ladies Group | 90 | Tamasha Theatre Company |
| 65 | Nari Women's Group | 91 | Tara Theatre |
| 66 | National Association of Asian Youth (no longer operational) | 92 | Tongues of Fire (now UK Asian Film Festival) |
| 67 | Nazrul Centre | 93 | Tower Hamlets Education and Culture Department |
| 68 | Nehru Centre | 94 | Tower Hamlets Elderly home shelter HARCA |
| 69 | New Zealand Theatre Federation | 95 | Tower Hamlets Youth Service (mother and daughters programme) |
| 70 | New Zealand Theatre Festival | 96 | Vermilion |
| 71 | Newham Asian Women's project | 97 | Warwick Temple |
| 72 | Oxford Wilderness | 98 | Watermans Arts Centre |
| 73 | Private events | 99 | Winchester Rotary Group |
| 74 | Pulse Asian Music and Dance | 100 | Womad – family tent |
| 75 | Rich Mix Community Hub | 101 | Women's Centre Berner Estate, Tower Hamlets |
| 76 | Royal Court Theatre | | |
| 77 | Royal Shakespeare Company (with elders at the Barbican) | | |
| 78 | Rural Yorkshire | | |

2.6 Working with older people: skills training requested and specialist experience offered

Most artists indicated that they make and or perform work that can be presented to any audience (77%) with 55% indicating work suitable for older South Asian audiences. There was little difference in the number who indicated that they can run workshops and make work with older South Asian participants and any participants (61% and 58% respectively. This is important

information, telling us that most of these artists can (and often do) work with any older people, including people from similar cultural backgrounds.

We asked what training artists would like to support their work with older people and offered five options. 23 responded, see chart below:



Further comments from eleven people, plus the chart data above, combine to tell us that the top three areas of training wanted are: **mental health awareness, multi-sensory approaches** and **dementia awareness**.

Prior to lockdown and during lockdown, I have delivered online classes for Asian elders specialising in ipad/ IT learning. Now, it would be useful to expand my work through a multi -sensory approach to enable me to learn new skills and approaches and engage with participants using more interesting and engaging methods.

The artists were also asked to indicate if they offered any training in the above skills themselves. Most of the artists do not (66%). But ten artists have a wealth of specialist experiences, having worked with or amongst refugees, visually impaired and disabled people, victims of abuse, vulnerable adults, Gypsy and Traveller communities, those living with mental health challenges and people living with dementia.

2.7 Artistic and community networks

There were 28/33 responses to the question: 'Are you part of any artistic or community networks?' Five people gave a straight 'no' with one describing themselves as 'out on a limb'. Three are not formally involved but they have knowledge of and / or contact with others in their sector.

Of the other responses:

- Eight are involved in community networks / creative sector networks / locally. Areas listed are Sandwell, Slough, Tower Hamlets (x3), Leicester, Newcastle, Sunderland
- Eight are part of specialist societies, companies or organisations. Those listed are: Society of Authors, Inner Vision Orchestra, Dhrupad Music Society, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Tagore Centre UK, SAA UK, Tamarind Theatre, Ghetto Tigers, Swadhinata Trust, Autograph Gallery, Rural Touring Network, Society for Storytelling, AndroTechne, Thames 21, Asian Women Writers Collective, Book Trust, IBBY (International Boards for Books For Young People), Amnesty International, Pulse, Vermilion, Brick Lane Circle, Society for Storytelling, British Bangladeshi Poetry Collective, Exiled Writers. Seven pursue their own networks / driving connection, informally
- Two people listed Asian TV and radio channels e.g. ATN Bangla¹

¹ A conversation with SAA also named Fever FM and Akash Radio Leeds <http://akashradioleeds.co.uk/about-us>. The latter have a couple of older presenters on their team.

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