



VISIONARIES: A SOUTH ASIAN ARTS AND AGEING COUNTER NARRATIVE

by Arti Prashar OBE and Elizabeth Lynch MBE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.

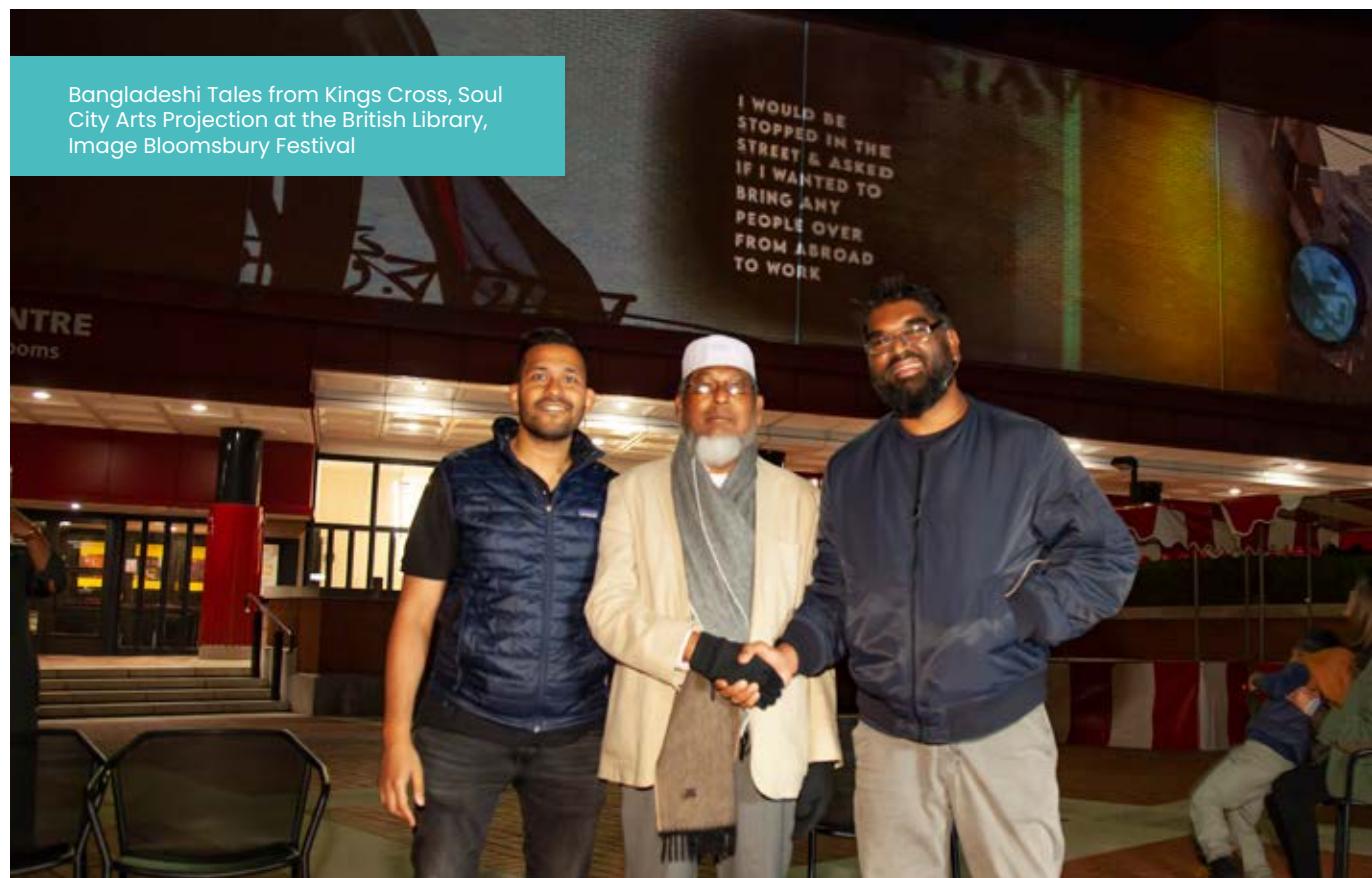
Now as the Director of a major cultural institution in one of England's super-diverse cities, I welcome CADA's commitment to bringing the widest range of voices and perspectives into the field of creative ageing. While Birmingham is the youngest city in Europe, with over 40% of the population under 25, 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



Kampala event day.
Image: Navrang Arts

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.
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.

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**

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 Burman¹

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

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?

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.



Love Unspoken
Image: Patrick Baldwin

6 VISIONARY STORIES

The six stories listed below can be found in full in the Research Findings section of the full report which is on the CADA website. 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.



Lippan artwork, Subrang Arts,
Image Elizabeth Lynch

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



Roohia Syed-Ahmed with her work

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.

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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>

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