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## I belong here too: An oral history of the immigration of Bangladeshis to New York City

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*James Madison University*

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I Belong Here Too:  
An Oral History of the Immigration of Bangladeshis to New York City

Subat Matin

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History

May 2023

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This oral history project was created with the love and support from the Sandwip community in Brooklyn, New York. Many of my interviewees had mentioned how Bangladeshi history is forgotten and my hope with these oral histories was to make Bangladeshi history more accessible and available for future researchers. Their stories should not be silenced or left out of history. I would like to thank all of my interviewees who allowed me into their homes and dedicated their time in order to share their stories with me. It helped me understand the impacts and struggles of being an immigrant in a new country and appreciate their hard work and sacrifices in order to build a better life for their families. Without their oral histories this project would not have been possible.

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## Abstract

*I Belong Here Too* is an oral history project which consists of twenty interviews of the Bangladeshi community in New York. The oral histories touch on many aspects of Bangladeshi-American life, history, memory, identity, culture, and the struggles of being an immigrant. It tries to put the interviewees experiences in a larger historical context in order to understand how the Bangladeshi community in Brooklyn, New York has grown and the challenges they faced as immigrants in a new city. The two chapters of this thesis examines the oral history processes and the difficulties of Bangladeshi immigrant women. The project is collaborating with the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) where it hosts the stories of the interviewees. Link to the oral history project: <https://www.saada.org/browse/collection/subat-matin-oral-history-interviews>.

## Introduction

### I. Background Information

At Independence, in 1947, British India was divided into two states: India and Pakistan. India was meant to be for the Hindus, while Pakistan was meant for Muslims. Simultaneously, Bengal, a region in the eastern part of British India was divided along religious lines with West Bengal made part of India and East Bengal joining Pakistan. Bangladesh did not exist at this time (East Bengal would later become Bangladesh).<sup>1</sup> In 1952, the Bengalis of East Bengal demonstrated their anger through protests because they wanted the Pakistani government to stop imposing Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, on the majority of Bengalis in East Bengal who spoke Bangla. Another issue that played a part of the separation was that the population of East Pakistan complained that foreign aid, particularly from the U.S, stayed in West Pakistan and did not reach them.<sup>2</sup> The tension between Pakistan (known as West Pakistan after 1955) and East Bengal (known as East Pakistan after 1955) led to rising nationalism in East Bengal. Pakistan responded with genocide. Known as Operation Search Light, on March 25, 1971, the West Pakistani army attacked and killed students, general citizens and the Bengali police of East Pakistan. The very next day East Pakistanis from all backgrounds took up arms against the West Pakistani army and for the next nine months fought a war, during which time they declared their independence as Bangladeshis. After West Pakistan surrendered on December 16, 1971, Bangladesh was formally recognized as a nation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ahrar Ahmad, "Bangladeshi Immigrants." *Multicultural American Encyclopedia of the Newest Americans*, ed. Ronald H. Bayor, (Santa Barbara, Calif: Greenwood, 2011), 109.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 113.

Furthermore, the Immigration Act of 1965, which in some ways prevented many immigrants from entering into the United States, “abolished the restrictive National Origins system originally passed in 1924 in favor of a quota and preference system. Priority was now given to ‘family reunification’ so that US citizens and permanent residents could sponsor their family members.”<sup>4</sup> The act also gave priority to immigrants with skills. Both of these priorities led to a growth in South Asian immigrants to the United States, including Bangladeshis who steadily arrived since 1972, after the U.S. recognized Bangladesh as a country. This also opened the door for student visas and allowed people who wanted to get a better education to come to the United States.<sup>5</sup> Bangladeshi immigration to the U.S. even saw an uptick after 9/11. Interestingly, Bangladeshi immigrants are one of the largest groups to immigrate to the U.S. between 1976 and 2002.<sup>6</sup>

Today, the impact of Bangladeshi immigration into New York cannot go unnoticed. Since 1990 to 2000 many neighborhoods in New York, such as Kensington-Ocean Parkway area in Brooklyn, Jamaica Hills section in Queens, and the Bronx are predominately Bangladeshi.<sup>7</sup> However, our understanding of this history is limited. More

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<sup>3</sup> Srimanti Sarkar, “The Genocide of 1971 in Bangladesh” *Conceptualizing Mass Violence: Representations, Recollections, and Reinterpretations*, (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), Ch. 6, 74-75.

<sup>4</sup>Zahir Ahmed, *Little Bangladesh: Voices from America* (1st ed.), Routledge India, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367765910>. 25.

<sup>5</sup>Ahrar Ahmad, “Bangladeshi Immigrants,” *Multicultural American Encyclopedia of the Newest Americans*, ed. Ronald H. Bayor, (Santa Barbara, Calif: Greenwood, 2011), 111.

<sup>6</sup>Zahir Ahmed, *Little Bangladesh: Voices from America* (1st ed.), Routledge India, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367765910>. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Tyler Anbinder, *City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant*, (New York. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 556.



is known about Bangladeshi immigration into the United States during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, while less is known about their immigration in the last quarter of the twentieth century. This project provides a fuller understanding of the history of Bangladeshi immigration to New York. It examines the history of Bangladeshi immigrants to Brooklyn during the peak time period between the 1970s and 1990s when many Bangladeshis began to migrate to the United States because of the Diversity Visa Program, which was the annual lottery system and the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). The legalization of these programs allowed more Bangladeshis to immigrate to the U.S. The oral histories collected draw awareness to the long and complicated immigration history of Bangladesh to the United States. The life stories of these twenty interviewees reveal the difficulties and life changing experiences of Bangladeshi immigrants in Brooklyn and help us understand how and why Bangladeshis came to America.

## **II. Historiography**

The discussion of Bangladeshi immigration into the U.S. has been omitted from the major works on American immigration history. For example, in *City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York*, historian Tyler Anbinder traces New York's history surrounding immigration and all its policies. He addresses different groups of immigrants coming to America, from the early Dutch settlers to Chinese, Caribbean, Jewish, Irish, and Italian immigrants. Anbinder describes the lives and struggles these immigrants faced in New York and the political rhetoric surrounding immigrants. He argues that the immigrant communities who were coming into New York during the nineteenth century were more narrow-minded than immigrants coming into the city more recently. Anbinder addresses how even during this time immigrants had the same fears

and struggles as many still do today before coming to America. In each chapter of the book, Anbinder narrates the vast immigration history of New York City and points out the contribution immigrants have made in developing American culture and society.<sup>8</sup> Regarding South Asians as a whole, Anbinder briefly talks about the group in a few pages of the last chapter of the book with a few statistics on population growth, the number of South Asian immigrants who were taxi drivers and how Muslim immigrants from South Asia were affected by 9/11. About Bangladeshi immigrants, more specifically, Anbinder mentions the popular Bengali neighborhoods in the city, such as Kensington-Ocean Parkway area in Brooklyn, Jamaica Hills section in Queens, and the Bronx.<sup>9</sup> He mentions how after 9/11 there has been an increase in the number of Bangladeshi immigrants. But that is that. Compared to other immigrant groups there is simply not enough historical scholarship in the book to learn about the history of Bangladeshi immigrants.<sup>10</sup>

While Mae Ngai's *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* is well written and focuses on undocumented immigration, it leaves out Bangladeshi immigrants and their struggles of being undocumented. Ngai writes about the economic roles of immigrants during the twentieth century and the ways in which immigrants have shaped America. But Ngai's main focus is on the political stigma that surrounds immigration and how it informs the public perceptions of immigrants. The book focuses primarily on Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Mexican immigrant groups.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 556.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 550-556

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 556.

Ngai discusses the liabilities of being “illegitimate” in the United States and how mainstream American culture has defined the term “illegal alien.” Ngai addresses the historical origins about being the “illegal alien” within American law and society.<sup>11</sup> She argues that illegal immigration has become a main problem for U.S. immigration policies and examines the restrictive and enforcement of immigration policies, such as the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, Hart-Celler Act of 1965 and the Immigration Act of 1965. Ngai also argues that the restrictions against immigration policies created a new regime in which American ideologies and practices surrounding race, citizenship and the nation-state have been deeply affected by the development of the twentieth century<sup>12</sup> Ngai examines the general group of immigrants that are often already written about. Ngai’s book is informative, and the discussion on Mexican and East Asian immigration experiences with respect to policies is important and deserves recognition. However, Ngai does not mention anything about Bangladeshis’ or the general South Asian immigrants in general coming to the U.S., even though they were characterized as one of the larger groups to immigrate to America during the same time period and have an history of being undocumented. Ngai’s book is a major work within the field of immigration history, but it excludes the history of Bangladeshi immigration. Anbinder and Ngai ultimately silence the history of Bangladeshi immigration to the U.S. by not mentioning much or anything at all about Bangladeshis.

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<sup>11</sup>Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press 2004), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 3.

The major works that are written about Bangladeshi immigrants focus on the earlier history and does not primarily focus on the time period or research area of this project. For example, in *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, Vivek Bald writes about immigration before 1947. Since Bangladesh and Pakistan had not been created by this time, he refers to the individuals as Indians and their place of origin as India in order to make sure everything is historically accurate. Bald uses the word South Asian when he looks at the post-1947 period and the term Bengali to specify people from the Bengal region and present-day Bangladesh. Bald argues that “the stories tells a great deal about U.S. neighborhoods and communities of color in the first half of the twentieth century about their heterogeneity, their openness, and unacknowledgeable role they played in U.S. immigration history.”<sup>13</sup> Bald examines all kinds of sources, like marriage certificates, birth and death certificates, ship manifests and census enumeration.<sup>14</sup> He also tells the stories of many Indian seamen and Bengali peddlers who had immigrated to America during the post-1947 period. He also details the travels and memories of Amir Haider Khan, who was an anticolonial activist working and living as a boilermaker in Buffalo, N.Y, and then as an autoworker in Detroit, MI.<sup>15</sup>

Following the independence in 1971, Bangladeshi immigration to the United States expanded. Bald adds that, during the early twentieth century, single and married immigrant Bengali men entered into contract marriages with African American or Puerto Rican women. For single men, this allowed them to gain U.S. citizenship, settle down,

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<sup>13</sup>Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, ix.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, 138.

and raise interracial families.<sup>16</sup> For already married men, it was a faster way of bringing their families over from overseas. Once they received citizenship, the contact came to an end and they divorced these women. Thereafter, as citizens, these Bengali men provided documentation showing that they were legally married in Bengal and applied for visas to bring their families over. Contract marriages contributed to the growth of an already large Bengali community in Harlem, New York.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to developing the history of South Asian migration to the U.S., Bald's study provides a fresh perspective on the descendants of South Asian immigrants and how they defined their identity. He identifies the family histories of Bengali immigrants and humanizes them, making us aware of these histories that have gone untold. Although this book is an important work for the South Asian community, it does not focus on the time period that this project will be focusing on. The book provides the earlier immigration of South Asians but does not look at Bangladeshi immigration into the U.S. after 1947. Additionally, it heavily focuses on the history of South Asian immigration to cities like Detroit, and New Orleans, LA. This project, instead, discusses the oral histories of Bangladeshi immigrants to Brooklyn between the 1970s and 1990s.

Another major contribution to this field is *Little Bangladesh: Voices from America* by Zahir Ahmed. Through the use of case studies, surveys, interviews and participant observations, the book focuses on the large Bangladeshi communities in Southern California, particularly in Los Angeles, San Diego and Riverside.<sup>18</sup> Ahmed

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid, 8.

<sup>17</sup>Since the author is discussing India in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and Bangladesh still does not exist, he refers to the immigrants as Bengalis. Ibid, 160-163.

gives a brief overview of the history of Bangladeshi migration to the United States from the late 1800s to the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> This discussion, however, does not rely on historical scholarship, but rather on his own experiences, observations, and stories told by the Bangladeshi community in Southern California, to which he belongs. Ahmed does provide a chapter addressing the Bangladeshi immigration to New York City, primary to Jamaica and Jackson Heights, where a large population of Bangladeshi immigrants live. Further, he tells us that approximately 35,275 to 66,197 Bangladeshis live in New York City, and that the numbers are increasing yearly.<sup>20</sup> Yet, Ahmed spends more time in the earlier history of Bangladeshi immigration into the U.S. than on their immigration between the 1970s and 1990s. In discussing more recent immigration, Ahmed turns to, “oral histories collected from elderly Bangladeshis in New York”<sup>21</sup> but only includes them briefly, which causes us to miss the richness and complexities of their stories. Ahmed does not provide readers with all of the oral histories he has collected. If the oral histories were made public it could help for research purposes. Further, the book does not mention the Bangladeshi community in Brooklyn even though that is where a lot of immigrants reside. Bald and Ahmed discuss Bangladeshi migration to America, but they cover the earlier history instead of the history of Bangladeshi immigrants to Brooklyn between the 1970s and 1990s.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 2-3.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 78.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 78.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 79.

### **III. The Oral History Process**

Since I grew up in the Sandwip community I knew many of the interviewees and their background history. I called my grandfather and asked him about specific people that came to New York during this time period and he pointed me towards a few of them. Some people did not want to be interviewed, but they told me about other people that came during this time and could be a potential interviewee. The interviews took place at the interviewees' homes and in some cases, outside of their homes, at the interviewer's place of residence. They took place in a quiet room, where the interviewees felt comfortable speaking. Since most live in the city and living situation is different for each person, there were all kinds of belongings and some noise in the background. A SONY digital camera and a tripod was used to record and as a backup, a voice recorder was placed in front of the interviewees. The camera was angled straight towards their faces and only showed half of their bodies, making the recording clearer.

Prior to the interviews, a questionnaire<sup>22</sup> was circulated so that interviewees could become familiar with the questions. Having them think over the questions beforehand not only let them know what I was interested in hearing, but also gave them a sense of comfort. To allow the interviewees the most freewill in telling their oral histories, the project used a life narrative method.<sup>23</sup> Interviewees were free to narrate their stories anyway they wanted and were only questioned further after they had finished speaking.

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<sup>22</sup>The questionnaire is available below.

<sup>23</sup>Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Third edition, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) 103-109.

During the oral histories, some interviewees requested to stop the video and asked to take out contents, while others wanted the interviewer to clarify legal ramifications of specific questions. In the end the interviews for this project went well and all the interviewees were appreciative of sharing their immigration stories. Many expressed the trauma and struggles in their lives that they had never shared before. A few wanted to forget the past and move on with what they have in the present.

Most of the interviews were done in Bangla. Having conducted the interviews in Bangla allowed for the interviewees to express more of what they wanted to share and allowed them to give more details about their stories. The interviews were also transcribed and reviewed by the interviewees. This allowed for the interviewer to review the transcripts and make sure that there were no mistakes within the transcription and translation. The most time consuming and difficult part of the process was translating the interviews from Bangla to English. Translating the interviews took a lot of time since I had to thoroughly listen and make sure that I was accurately translating everything. I had to listen to sections a few times in order to ensure that translations accurately conveyed what the interviewee said. Additionally, video recordings had to be processed and edited to take out background noises that affected sound quality. This stage of the project also provided an opportunity to follow up with interviewees to see if they wanted to elaborate on particular questions and make corrections. The editing process was complicated because of technical difficulties with saving the videos onto the hard drive. Most of the interviews are long and took a very lengthy time uploading and saving to my computer properly. There were a couple of times when I lost the original edits of the interviews because it did not save and then I had to redo all of the editing. After the videos were



edited, transcribed, and translated the interviewees were asked for final permissions before submitting the oral histories to the digital exhibit.

### **Developing the Questions**

The questions selected are influenced by former graduate student Hannah Moses's thesis, books, and case studies about Bangladeshi and South Asian immigration, and my personal experiences with family members.<sup>24</sup> I decided to categorize the questions under more general themes because I thought it would help organize what I wanted to ask the interviewees. I also wanted to ask questions that the interviewees felt comfortable responding to and sharing stories about. By following the life narrative method, the interviewees addressed a lot of the questions especially from the personal narrative part and this allowed me to just skip around and ask other questions that I wanted to know the answers to. There were a few questions that I felt might cross ethical boundaries and worried that if answered might cause legal troubles for my interviewees. These included the following: What was the immigration process like for you? Do you know or were aware of any laws that affected your immigration process? Do you know of anyone who would marry African American women in order to get their citizenships? I asked the interviewees whether or not they wanted to answer these questions before they sat down for the recorded interview. However, one regret that I have is not asking more questions pertaining to September 11, 2001, because many of these interviewees faced problems and lived in New York at the time the tragic events occurred they could have talked more

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<sup>24</sup>Hannah Moses, "Ang Buhay sa Nayan-Life in the Valley: An oral history project with the Shenandoah Living Archive" (2015). Masters Theses. 34. Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013). Kaari Flagstad Baluja, *Gender Roles at Home and Abroad the Adaptation of Bangladeshi Immigrants*. (New York: LFB Scholarly Pub., 2003).

about their experiences before and after 9/11. Some of my interviewees briefly mentioned this but did not elaborate.

## Questions

### Personal Narrative:

When and where were you born?

What was your childhood like?

What did your parents do?

How many siblings did you have?

What was school like?

What kind of food did you eat?

When you were in Bangladesh, what did you know about American culture?

How did you hear about America? What was your opinion of America/Americans?

Has your opinion changed since coming here?

Why did you leave Bangladesh?

Why did you want to immigrate to New York specifically? When did you immigrate?

What did you hope to gain by settling in New York?

What kinds of experiences did you have in New York?

What surprised you about New York and American culture?

Did you hear about other Bangladeshis coming to America?

Did you ever experience any discrimination?

How did you have to adjust to the “American lifestyle”?

What do you like about New York?

Why did you choose to settle in New York rather than another state?

How did it change your families?

What problems did you encounter?

Did you choose to speak English or did not? Why?

What was the hardest part of coming to New York and leaving your family?

What was the best thing about it?

How often did you go back to visit your family in Bangladesh?

How do you keep in contact with family back in Bangladesh?

How do your relatives back home think of you now?

What do you do now?

Do you consider America or Bangladesh your home?

### **Culture**

“In her lifetime, a woman is referred to as her father’s daughter, her husband’s wife, and her son’s mother. Her identity and that of her mother take on secondary importance.”<sup>25</sup>  
Was this true for you? Do you still feel this way?

Did/could women have worked outside the household in Brooklyn?

Did Bangladeshi immigrant women experience isolation in Brooklyn?

“How do you think opportunities for women in Bangladesh have changed over your lifetime? In the US?”<sup>26</sup>

“How do you think the roles of men and women in Bangladesh have changed over your lifetime? In the US?”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Kaari Flagstad Baluja, *Gender Roles at Home and Abroad the Adaptation of Bangladeshi Immigrants*. (New York: LFB Scholarly Pub., 2003). 42.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 241.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 241.

“How do you think your roles as wife and mother have changed over the course of your marriage? How do you think your roles as wife and mother have changed since arriving in the US?”<sup>28</sup>

“How do you think your roles as husband and father have changed over the course of your marriage? How do you think your roles as husband and father have changed since arriving in the US?”<sup>29</sup>

What kinds of traditions and customs did you keep?

Is there anything you gave up?

What kinds of traditions did you want to change and pass down to your children?

What did you expect from your children and grandchildren of being cultured and religious?

What do your children and family believe?

What kinds of challenges do you face when trying to preserve family traditions or culture?

What is the extent of the middle-class and upper-class movements and or people in the Bangladeshi community?

Where did you get halal/Bengali food come from?

What makes a Bangladeshi? What do you think are considered to be Bangladeshi cultural traits or identity?

What do you like about Bangladeshi culture? Do you think Islam influences Bangladeshi culture?

Do you see or think there are any problems with Bangladeshi culture?

### **Bangladeshi Identity**

Do you consider yourself a Bangladeshi or American?

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 241.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 241.

How do you see your identity?

What is the difference between being Bangladeshi American and just Bangladeshi?

How do your children or family see their identity?

Where did you meet other Bangladeshi people when you first immigrated here?

Do you use social media?

What is the Bangladeshi community like in Brooklyn, New York?

Are you part of any organizations in Brooklyn?

Why do you like this organization? What benefits you being part of this organization?

What are some struggles or challenges Bangladeshi's face in Brooklyn, New York?

### **History**

Were you told of any stories of the time when Britain still had control over the Bengal region?

Were you told any stories about Partition?

Did you know anything or how things were like when Bangladesh was East Pakistan and under West Pakistan's control?

What are your thoughts or opinions on the 1971 Bangladesh genocide?

Do you know anyone who left East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and took refuge in India during the civil war with Pakistan?

What did you think about the famine that occurred in Bangladesh in 1974?

Do you know anyone who fought in the war?

Do you remember what you were taught about Bangladesh history?

What was important about Bangladesh's history?

Why do so many Bangladeshis go to the Middle East first in order to seek jobs? What kinds of jobs? How were they treated? What was life like living in the Middle East?

What kinds of jobs did you hold in the U.S.?

Did you ever learn about New York or the United States history in school?

What was the immigration process like for you?

Do you know or were aware of any laws that affected your immigration process?

Did you hear of Bengalis immigrating to different countries other than America or other parts of the U.S.?

What was it like working with other groups of people?

What was the naturalization process like?

Do you know of anyone who would marry African American women in order to get their citizenships?

### **Memory**

Do you still reminisce about your life in Bangladesh?

What is your favorite memory of Bangladesh or your life there?

What do you miss about living in Bangladesh?

How did you keep track of events that took place in Bangladesh after you left?

Is there anything you would change about your life or your immigration journey?

Do you have any regrets?

What accomplishments are you most proud of?

### **IV. Selective Bios of Interviewees**

Below you will read some responses by a few of my interviewees, namely Shahajan Begum, Mohammad Idris and Mostaq Haider.<sup>30</sup> Shahajan Begum was interviewed on July 5, 2022. Begum was born in Sandwip, Bangladesh and first came to

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<sup>30</sup>Full biographies of the interviewees are available on the website.

Brooklyn, NY in 1989. She begins by talking about her childhood in Bangladesh where she lived with her parents, grandmother and seven siblings. Begum's mom raised her and her siblings alone because her father was always working abroad. She got married at the age of 14 and lived with her in laws. Begum says she loved living with her in-laws because they always treated her fairly and showed a lot of love, saying, "my in laws used to tell our neighbors in our village that I was their elder son's wife and they always took care of me." Begum's husband always worked abroad and was never home to take care of their children. It was up her to take of the kids and figure out ways to raise them alone. She says, "I always worried about raising the children. My husband was abroad and I didn't know what to do. Their father wasn't there and I had to figure out how I wanted to raise my children."

Begum explains that because she got married young, she was unable to stay in school and complete her education, claiming that "my father was very religious and said that he didn't want to let his daughter continue her education. Getting married young was difficult and I didn't know how to take care of the household in my in-laws' house. It was hard for me to accept everything at first." At the same time, Begum wanted to show her in laws that she could take care of the household and throughout the interview praises and thanks Allah for her in laws. "I wanted to keep everyone happy" she says. After Begum first immigrated to America, she talks about how she did not like it at first. She missed Bangladesh and everyone else she had to leave behind. Throughout the interview Begum reminisces about life back in Bangladesh and claims that holding onto the memories is all

that she has left “I still would like to leave America, but I can’t because my family is here, Bangladesh is my country and I love it there. It’s my Bangladesh.”<sup>31</sup>

Mohammad Idris was interviewed on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Born in Sandwip, Bangladesh, Idris came to the U.S. on a business visa in 1985 and stayed at his father’s place. His father has been residing in the U.S. for a long time and once Idris came to America he went to Florida and then traveled to other parts of the United States. After returning to New York from his travels Idris realized that he wanted to stay in the U.S. permanently and do something with his life. He started working in construction, painting and repairing things, which he continues to do today. Once the U.S. government gave him amnesty to become a legal resident in the country, he saved money and brought his family to the U.S. He was finally able to help his relatives and provide his children an education. Idris had some education from Bangladesh and his wife was also a schoolteacher there. While he lived in Bangladesh he says, “The only thing I wanted in life was to see America one day and thought about how I can come to America.” The only thing Idris knew about the U.S. before immigrating was that there were many opportunities here compared to other countries and that one can make a lot of money here.

He talks about his childhood and how he was well-off while living in Bangladesh since his father was in America and was sending money to the family. He talked about how when he first came here that he did not know that halal foods could be found or that a lot of presumed halal foods would be mixed together with pork and other non-halal meats. Idris mentions the Bangladeshi community in Brooklyn on Church and McDonald

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<sup>31</sup>Shahajan Begum, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022. Queens, New York.



Avenue<sup>32</sup> where there is always a big gathering of Bangladeshis. Idris says, “I wanted to do some of my education here, but I couldn’t because my papers had some issues and I had to work to make money.” He is proud to be an American and that he can live in the U.S. He realizes that had he lived in Bangladesh, he would not have had the same opportunities. At the end of the interview Idris talks about how he always wanted to travel with his wife, but because she passed away a few years ago he does not want to travel anymore. Idris advises to seize the moment because even though his wife also wanted to travel, they were unable to because he was always busy trying to earn money.<sup>33</sup>

Mostaq Haider was interviewed on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022. Haider was born in Sandwip, Bangladesh and came to the United States in 1996. He lived in Brooklyn with his wife and three kids and in 2021 bought a house and moved to Long Island. When he first came to New York he went to a two-year college to get his associates degree and then went to Brooklyn college to earn his accounting degree. While working on his associates degree he was also working in a bank. Since then, he had different roles in several banks and eventually became a bank manager. He describes that his childhood in Bangladesh was not pleasant because his mother died when he was seven years old and that he had to grow up with a stepmom who was not always pleasant. His childhood was restricted because he went to religious school and he was not able to do much. Eventually he moved to the city of Chittagong and lived with his grandmother and uncle.

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<sup>32</sup> For years Church and McDonald Avenue in Brooklyn, New York has been a prime gathering for Bangladeshis since this is where many socialize, the Sandwip communities’ organizations take place, and many Bangladeshi-owned stores are found. Just recently it was announced by the District Thirty-Nine Council to name this area “Little Bangladesh” on October 16<sup>th</sup> 2022.

<sup>33</sup>Mohammad Idris, interview by Subat Matin, July 15, 2022. Brooklyn, New York.

Before he had the chance to finish school in Bangladesh, he got his immigrant visa and moved to the United States. He says, “My dream was to finish my degree and look for opportunities to go to school in the U.S.” He talks about how his English was not good and tells a story of going to a store for a bottle of water, but not knowing where the bottles were located. When he finally asked the employee where he could find a bottle of water, the employee could not understand him because of his accent. He says understanding the language was challenging and even though he could read English he could not speak it. He talks about how some neighborhoods in Brooklyn were accepting of new immigrants while others were not. Before coming to the U.S., he thought that New York was only America. He explains that he knew about the other states but believed that because everyone always went to New York first, that New York was essentially America. He thought that the city was the best place for newcomers, since it was very easy to commute and find jobs. At the end he thanks America and believes that it really is a country of opportunity and that it is possible to achieve your dreams.<sup>34</sup>

## **V. Examples of Oral Histories**

Date: July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Interviewee: Shahajan Begum

Interviewer: Subat Matin

Location: Queens, New York

MATIN: What do you remember about the 1971 war in Bangladesh?

BEGUM: Everyone used to say that there is a war, and the freedom fighters are going to come. Everyone used to say to keep crushed peppers ready that we can fend off anyone who comes onto the island. We heard that once the freedom fighters came here, they would ruin a women’s reputation and say bad things to women. We also heard that they

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<sup>34</sup>Mostaq Haider, interview by Subat Matin, July 16, 2022. Brooklyn, New York.

would take away girls. My dadi (paternal grandma) used to tell us this. I used to get so scared when I heard these stories. But thank Allah that no one really came to Sandwip. I heard the farthest they came was by the river. We didn't see any of this thank Allah.

MATIN: Do you know anyone who fought in the war?

BEGUM: No, I didn't really know anyone.

MATIN: Did any of your relative fight in the war?

BEGUM: No, no one in my family fought in the war. Wait... I did have a brother-in-law that was part of the war. When the freedom fighters were looking for him, he hid in my in laws house. Other than him there was no one else in my family that fought in the war. He used to work in the Pakistani army that's why the freedom fighters were looking for him.

MATIN: Do you still reminisce about your life in Bangladesh?

BEGUM: I remember about my childhood and what my parents used to do. My dad used to live abroad and my seven siblings. My dadi (paternal grandma) used to take care of us and loved us very much. My dadi would talk about my dad and how she did not have anyone other than my dad. My dad went abroad when he was young, he only went to school until 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade. That's why my dadi used to spend so much time with us and told us stories about my dad. She used to make us sit next to her and tell us how she sent our dad away at a young age so that you guys would have a good life. My dadi had one son and one daughter so she used to be very upset about not being able to see my father often. She used to cry for him and when he would send us letter, she would listen to this and cry more. I was a child so I didn't used to understand why my dadi would do this.

MATIN: What is your favorite memory of Bangladesh or your life there? What do you miss about living in Bangladesh?

BEGUM: Memory... I miss living there. I miss seeing my siblings and my family. I want to go back and stay there with my siblings and all of my relatives. I don't go out much here and my husband doesn't drive anymore. I don't like it here, so I wish to go back. I go back to desh I would like it there. I was born and raised there. My dad's house, my in laws, all my relatives everything is there. This is why like Bangladesh; I want to go back. The truth is I can't leave my grandchildren here and go back. I will miss them, but I miss Bangladesh too. What should I do? I can't go.<sup>35</sup>

Date: July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022

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<sup>35</sup>Shahajan Begum, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022. Queens, New York.

Interviewee: Mohammad Idris

Interviewer: Subat Matin

Location: Brooklyn, New York

MATIN: What do you remember about the 1971 war in Bangladesh? What are your thoughts or opinions on the 1971 Bangladesh genocide?

IDRIS: When “Bangabandhu” (friend of Bengal) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman tirelessly worked for Bangladesh. The Pakistani army didn’t want him to come in power. Rahman told Bangladeshis to take arms against Pakistan and that he is going to fight for Bangladesh’s independence. Then we listened to Bangabandhu, and all fought against Pakistan. When Pakistan started to hurt and commit crimes against Bangladeshis many went to India to train on how to fight a guerilla war against Pakistan. Bangladeshis fought the Pakistani army and won independence.

MATIN: Do you know anyone who fought in the war?

IDRIS: Yes, I know people. There were a lot of people who lived near me that fought in the war. I also helped a lot of people go to India to train for the war. In our village we gave money to people who wanted to go fight. We told them go to India and train that way you can come back here and help fight. Many of my friends left, but lucky I didn’t. I stayed in my village. But those who wanted to go fight in the war we helped them out in many ways.

MATIN: What did you think about the famine that occurred in Bangladesh in 1974? What do you remember about it?

IDRIS: Actually, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman wanted to help Bangladesh in different ways. During that time the country wasn’t in good condition, and he tried to help. Politically there wasn’t enough food supply given from other countries to aide Bangladesh which is why many didn’t have enough to eat. In our village we were okay and had enough money. The people around us who were affected we donated and helped around us.

MATIN: Do you still reminisce about your life in Bangladesh?

IDRIS: While I lived in Bangladesh there were two things that always stayed in my head. One thing being if I could never come to America the I will become a teacher. My wife was a teacher and I thought I would become one too. My wife and I decided to do this together, become a schoolteacher and that is what our life would be like since we were

well off. This was a dream I had. But later my opportunity to come to America was successful which is why I didn't this.

MATIN: What is your favorite memory of Bangladesh or your life there? What do you miss about living in Bangladesh?

IDRIS: In Bangladesh I'm a village boy. My whole life was spent in the village. My father and uncles who lived in the village were all farmers. They used to farm vegetables and paddy fields. My friends and I used to go to the stores and eat "mola" (puffed rice ball with date sugar). There was kalojaam fruit, we used to have a kalojaam tree in our village, a very big tree and the kalojaam would fall under the tree and we would collect them and eat it. This was one of my favorite foods and I miss eating it. There were fresh fruits in Bangladesh that we can't find here. My favorite thing to do in the village was climb trees with my friends and pick these fruits. Many of my friends left this world and I am not the same age anymore to do these things.<sup>36</sup>

Date: July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Interviewee: Mostaq Haider

Interviewer: Subat Matin

Location: Long Island, New York

HAIDER: In 1971 a lot of my friends and family members they went to war to fight against Pakistan. They went to "muktijoddha" (Liberation War) and the fought to become liberated from Pakistan. My father's uncle he went to fight and never came back. We still don't know whether he is alive. Some people say he's still in Pakistan, some say he's in India, or Myanmar and he just hid there and became a citizen of that country. That's the kind of history we learned. My father didn't go to war he just supported local freedom fighters financially, sometimes they would come to our house, they would feed them at night and hide them. The next day they would disappear and go for war, that's how he was supportive. That's all basically he told us. After that there are a lot of community members and relatives that went to war, how they came back, what they did we heard and learned.

MATIN: Do you know anyone who took refuge in India during the war? Do you know anyone who fought in the war?

HAIDER: As I said my father's uncle he never came back and we still know whether he took refuge in India or. But from my other community, the village we grew up I don't

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<sup>36</sup>Mohammad Idris, interview by Subat Matin, July 15, 2022. Brooklyn, New York.

know anyone who went to war or took refuge in India. I know a couple of people that went for training in India. They didn't take refuge, but they trained in India and then came back.

MATIN: What do you personally remember how things were like during the war?

HAIDER: No, I was very young. I remember... no I don't have any memories I was very young.

MATIN: What are your thoughts or opinions about the 1971 Bangladesh genocide?

HAIDER: The education and history that I learned from my father; I believe what I learned my father was the best knowledge because studying history in school in Bangladesh is diverted. World history is mixed now, it's diverted because of the political parties they make up their own history. Whatever goes on their side, if anything is bad on their side, they just eliminate it from the history, they rewrite history. But I believe whatever I learned from my father and family members those were the real experiences, real histories of the world.

I believe the Pakistani's were brutal to Bangladeshi people, Bangladeshi people didn't get much opportunity, they were like bad ruler. They didn't give the same treatment to Bangladeshi people and Pakistani people so there was a lot of unfairness and misjudgment of Bangladeshi people. That's why they had to be liberated and be a separate part. But at the same time India helped Bangladesh. I believe India had their own interests to separate Bangladesh from Pakistan. India didn't do it for the benefit of Bangladeshi people, they had their own benefits. There is a lot of political issues. My learning experience was that Bangladesh becoming independent was a blessing for Bangladesh, but at the same time becoming independent is kind of a disaster for Bangladesh to be a neighbor country of India. Now India is doing the same thing Pakistan did to Bangladesh.

MATIN: What did you think about the famine that occurred in Bangladesh in 1974? What do you remember about it?

HAIDER: That time I witnessed a little bit... I saw people suffer a lot at that time. Thank God my father had a small business, we had a little bit of land. We weren't in a great situation, but we didn't go through that much suffering as other people did. I saw a family, next to our home it's still in my memory. During the sunny daylight, afternoon time they were just sitting in the open field. They were digging for nothing; they didn't go home because they don't have any food at home. Everybody was crying there was five or six people in the family. 3 of the adult kids and their father just sitting in the open field on a sunny day.

My mother saw them, we knew them because they lived next to our house. My mother cooked the rice and she put some rice and the liquid of the rice that we call “maar” she put it in a bowl, in a jar with maar put some rice in there and salt, she gave me the bowl and told me to go give it to them. I gave it to them and those people having that thing was shocking. They seemed like they didn’t expect it. Four of them ate it, gave thanks to my mom, thanked me and were hugging and kissing me. I was a 5 or 6 year-old boy. That memory reminds me how people suffered. That family had two smaller children and they gave them to other people; some rich people adopted them.

MATIN: Do you still reminisce about your life in Bangladesh?

HAIDER: Only my boyhoods, I feel like if I could go back to my elementary school life, that was my best life I wish I could go back which is not possible. But in general no.

MATIN: What is your favorite memory of Bangladesh or your life there?

HAIDER: My favorite memory, my first two years of college after I finished my high school, the first two years in college was the best time in my life because I was more outgoing with friends and I moved to the city. I think I had more freedom that time. I did a lot of things with my friends, go out and visited a lot of places in Bangladesh. I visited almost all places in Bangladesh that time and I was able to drive so that was kind of the best time in my young life, young age in Bangladesh, that was my best time.

MATIN: What do you miss about living in Bangladesh?

HAIDER: I feel like food mostly. Bangladesh food, I feel like still the taste is much better and food is the best thing that I miss.<sup>37</sup>

## **VI. The Writing Process**

For the analytical chapter of the project, I decided to write about Bangladeshi immigrant women since out of the twenty interviewees only six of them were women. This chapter is an example of how my oral histories can be used to produce historical writing. I felt that their voices were being left out and I wanted to be able to talk about their experiences and hardships. Their struggles were different compared to the male interviewees and I wanted to highlight some of the areas that they faced differently than

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<sup>37</sup>Mostaq Haider, interview by Subat Matin, July 16, 2022. Brooklyn, New York.

men as immigrants coming to the United States. The process of writing was difficult because I did not have many primary or secondary sources to rely on and that also spoke explicitly about the experiences of Bangladeshi immigrant women. There are not a lot of primary and secondary sources to work with when researching about Bangladeshi immigrant women, which demonstrates how silent the historical archive is on Bangladeshi immigrant history and, in turn, which there are so few secondary sources. Thus, the oral histories I conducted served as the foundation for the chapter. I used them to build the narrative, but also turned to other oral histories and newspapers to further develop my claims about Bangladeshi women. This other collection of oral histories was documented by the Brooklyn Historical Society in 2018 titled “Muslims in Brooklyn.” While it focuses on the broader stories of immigrants, many spoke of Bangladeshi women who came to America during the time period that my chapter focused on, which helped me thoroughly develop my arguments.

As I wrote, I realized there were a number of questions I should have asked my interviewees about their experiences as immigrant women in the U.S. A lot of the things they said were useful, but I could have asked them to speak more on it. I found the writing process to be difficult because this chapter was about Bangladeshi women and there was already a limited number of sources that I was working with. Throughout this whole writing process one of the hardest things for me is watching and listening to the interviews that were given by women. I am not disregarding any of the interviews from the men, but this process made me appreciate the stories and lives of my women interviewees even more. I am honored to have had the opportunity to sit down and chat with all of them. I will always be thankful for the love and sacrifices each of them made



in their lives and during their immigration journey in order to keep their families safe and happy. They experienced many difficulties as new immigrants to the U.S. and often struggled living in their new environment. Since I was using quotes from the interviewees I also had to go back and translate. In some areas of these translations, I was not sure what the interviewees were trying to say and some of the things that were said was not clear enough so I called my interviewees and asked them if was okay for me to take some things out and to clarify on what they meant. In one section of the chapter where I write about what it is like being a Bangladeshi women, I wanted some more details in order to provide the evidence, but my interviewees did not want to talk more about it. Therefore, I had to edit out some quotes and further grow my analysis of the chapter.

## **VII. Collaboration with South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA)**

One of my primary goals for this project was finding an appropriate place to house the oral histories. This was important to me because collaborating with an organization allows for the sharing of my oral histories with more Bangladeshis, South Asians and other community members. I also want the oral histories to be around for a long time. In other words, I wanted this project to be publicly accessible and grow over time. I therefore contacted a few organizations to see if they would like to collaborate. These included Brooklyn Historical Society and the New York Public Library, the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL), and the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). I heard back from SAADA and BPL. I met with both organizations to talk about my project and to learn how it could be stored onto their sites. I told them about my interviewees and how and why I started the project. Both organizations were immediately

excited and accepted my oral history project to be housed there. However, there were different strengths and weaknesses with these organizations that I had to consider.

Part of the BPL is the Center of Brooklyn History which has a program called “Our Streets, Our Stories” (<https://www.bklynlibrary.org/osos>). This program collected oral histories from older adults that talk about how Brooklyn was in the past and how it is now. The aim of this project is to collect the oral histories from diverse neighborhoods in order to help future generations understand the history of Brooklyn. Center of Brooklyn History is a bigger organization with a large outreach. I would still have full ownership of my oral interviews and they would promote the oral interviews online and on social media. The outreach department was also interested in creating a joint program with the library to have the interviewees come in and talk about their immigration stories and experiences. However, a weakness of this organization is that they would only want the interviews that are about Brooklyn. This was a big issue because my interviews of those who moved to Virginia and Queens would not be accepted, which is something I was not willing to accept.

I ultimately made the decision to house my oral histories with SAADA (<https://www.saada.org/>). I liked SAADA from the beginning because I felt like my oral interviewees fit perfectly and belonged in this archive. SAADA has been around since 2008 and it will be a good place to house the oral histories for a long time. Many of the projects that they have are oral histories and they even have an oral history fellowship for future collaborators that they award every year. When I explored the website, I found many histories and stories from other South Asian Americans who have created projects that contribute to understanding South Asian history. I felt like I was finally able to

connect with a place and really wanted my oral history project to be housed here. There were, however, some issues to consider. SAADA was not giving me enough time to complete my project and expected it to be completed by the end of 2022. They also were not allowing me to upload parts of my interviews onto the website as I finalized them. I wanted to see my website come to life as I was translating and transcribing. I did not want to wait until the end. This was not possible since I still had to edit, translate and transcribe my videos. I decided to send SAADA an email asking them to watch one of the interviews and to negotiate a reasonable time frame. After watching the interviews and impressed with the content and clarity of the video, SAADA officially offered to collaborate with me and agree to some of my terms. Then, I followed up with SAADA explaining that I wanted to begin uploading my oral histories sooner and they worked with me to get a link up.

Throughout the collaboration process I updated SAADA on the progress of my project. I had met with them a few times to discuss next steps and how my project was going to look on their site. There were many email exchanges on what exactly I needed to do before my oral histories could be posted on SAADA's site. I clarified to SAADA that I would give send them a few videos and their transcriptions each day so that they could begin uploading the content to their site. SAADA, in return, asked me to write an abstract and send biographies and pictures of the interviewees. They also required the interviewees to sign release forms. In early February, I went to New York and obtained the signatures for some interviewees. For others I used DocuSign, which I explained to all of my interviewees the process of how their interviews would be uploaded onto SAADA's website. Not only did my interviewees have to fill out paperwork, but I did as

well. I gave the names of my interviewees, the dates their interviews were conducted, and whether I gave SAADA permission to post the videos onto their site. Once all of the release forms were submitted and I had completed the appropriate paperwork, SAADA informed me how the content was going to be uploaded. They had asked me to share a Dropbox link with them where all the edited interviews could be found and they shared with me a Google folder where I could upload the transcriptions. I had translated and transcribed one interviewee per day and once finished I would email SAADA and let them know that it was ready. Then within the next few days the oral histories would be uploaded onto the website. I also wanted to store the oral histories as backup in JMU's collections. But this never materialized. I corresponded with several people in the library but no one responded to my questions regarding some of the copyrights questions I had and was never sent the release forms either.

Figure 1: The Oral History Archive

[https://www.saada.org/browse/collection/subat-matin-oral-history-interviews.](https://www.saada.org/browse/collection/subat-matin-oral-history-interviews)

### **VIII. Conclusion**

Throughout this entire experience I wanted to share my oral history experience and the difficulties writing about a topic that has limited sources to work with. This project helped me find my passion for oral history and develop my interests in further researching about Bangladeshi immigration. I want people to understand the history and struggles that Bangladeshi immigrants faced while coming to America and it was a privilege being able to interview people who are part of the Sandwip community and those who were. I hope that these oral histories and the collaboration with SAADA help bring attention to the history of Bangladeshi-Americans. I also hope to see my website

grow, with other people adding their oral histories of Bangladeshi-Americans to the website. Maybe when there is finally more information and history regarding Bangladeshi immigration future historians and researchers can turn to my project and help break the silences surrounding this group of immigrants.

The history of a growing Bangladeshi American population has been overlooked up to now. Ideally, the U.S. is one of the countries with the most immigrants and foundation of the country is built for “dreamers.” The Bangladeshi immigrants of Brooklyn are the dreamers. Although most oral histories focus on cities that have large populations of immigrants such as New York, the project contains the untold stories of a vibrant and rich community in a city where their voices and lives remain underrepresented. Many people do not know Bangladesh’s history, which includes the Partition of Bengal, the union with Pakistan, the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide, the Bangladesh Liberation War and the famine of 1974. Some people still do not know that Bangladesh is a country. This collection of oral histories draws awareness to the long and complicated immigration history of Bangladesh to the United States. The life stories of these twenty interviewees reveal the difficulties and life changing experiences of Bangladeshi immigrants in Brooklyn and helps us understand how and why Bangladeshis came to America to make different lives for themselves.

## Chapter 1: “The Burden of Being a Woman”: The Bangladeshi Immigrant Experience

### I. Introduction

When Farida Matin reflects back on her life as an immigrant, she does not talk about the regrets but rather the hardships and struggles she endured while growing up in Bangladesh. As the third daughter in her family, Farida’s birth disappointed her grandmother, who was expecting to finally have grandson, but instead got another granddaughter. “My grandmother asked my mother why it wasn’t a boy this time?” Upset and frustrated, her grandmother treated Farida and her mother harshly. “In Bangladeshi culture even though you had a daughter you still needed to have a son. That was the mentality of Bangladeshis.” Farida’s father on the other hand was happy and thankful for another healthy child. “My dad always supported me and loved me the most. He told my grandmother I had a daughter why do you have a problem with that?”<sup>38</sup>

Farida’s story is one of the many examples of what life it was like for Bangladeshi immigrant women living in the United States. Having to juggle their Bangladeshi cultural duties with the hardships they faced as immigrants and their struggles of being mothers in a new country without any guidance made their life in the United States difficult. By going through all of this they paved the way for new Bangladeshi immigrant women. Not only did they persevere in the end, but their troubles showed that their new lives in America were slowly getting better especially for a generation of women.

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<sup>38</sup>Farida Matin, interview by Subat Matin, August 8, 2022, Manassas, Virginia.

## **II. Being a Bangladeshi Woman**

In Bangladeshi culture, women have arranged marriages in which many of them have little choice in whom they marry. Male relatives organize a suitable match, usually someone from their villages. Once the wife moved into her husband's family, she is no longer supported by her father or any kin, as "her membership in her father's household is truncated at the very point at which she is entering the productive and reproductive stage of her life."<sup>39</sup> After marriage, women rush to conceive in hopes of proving their fertility. Furthermore, a woman is not only judged by her appearance, but also by the ways in which she takes care of her husband and the household. She was expected to follow orders and remain respectful at all times. Getting married young gave her husband's family control to shape her into what they wanted it to be. The restrictive behavior placed specifically on women comes from old Bangladeshi folklore culture mixed with Islamic ideologies.<sup>40</sup>

In 1974, Rehana Alam was 16 years old when she got married and had two sons a year apart. Growing up her father was absent from her life since he was captured by freedom fighters during the 1971 Liberation War and never returned home. "I got married unexpected. My mom got me married quickly. My dad wasn't there and my mom was by herself. My brothers were younger and were studying. But it was difficult for my mother to raise all of us after my father's absence."<sup>41</sup> Since Bangladeshi women are seen as

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<sup>39</sup>Kaari Flagstad Baluja, *Gender Roles at Home and Abroad the Adaptation of Bangladeshi Immigrants*, (New York: LFB Scholarly Pub., 2003) 43.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid, 38.

<sup>41</sup>Rehana Alam, interview by Subat Matin, July 18, 2022, Brooklyn, New York.

vulnerable their honor and virtue need to be protected by a male relative generally their father.

Through arranged marriages Bangladeshi women faced a loss of identity. Married at an early age not only denied women their childhood experiences, but also led them away from a life they knew. After marrying a woman's primary responsibility was to her husband's household. She was after all "her husband's wife."<sup>42</sup> At the age of 14, Shahjan Begum got married to her husband who was ten years her senior. "I got married young and accepted everything that my in-laws told me to do. They loved and raised me. My in laws used to tell our neighbors in our village that I was their elder son's daughter-in-law and they always took care of me."<sup>43</sup> Begum immediately began to take care of her in-laws and the household chores. Additionally, she had children soon after her marriage and had to raise them on her own, since her husband always worked abroad. Begum was not allowed to visit her family's home very much because her in-laws believed that after marriage a woman needed to stay at her husband's house. Like Begum, Rehana Alam also felt identity loss when she had to move into her in-law's home. "After I got married my in-laws loved me but they didn't like it when I visited at my parents and would send me home upon being there for a day. When I conceived with my first son my in- laws would not let me visit much at all."<sup>44</sup> The identity of Bangladeshi women was limited, as they were only meant to be housewives. For Bangladeshi women, letting go of their individual autonomous identities after marriage helped them adapt to traditional gender

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<sup>42</sup>Kaari Flagstad Baluja, *Gender Roles at Home and Abroad the Adaptation of Bangladeshi Immigrants*, (New York: LFB Scholarly Pub., 2003) 42-43.

<sup>43</sup>Shahajan Begum, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022. Queens, New York.

<sup>44</sup>Rehana Alam, interview by Subat Matin, July 18, 2022, Brooklyn, New York.



roles. Following marriages, women did not only lose a version of themselves, but they had to prepare for motherhood.<sup>45</sup>

Bangladeshi mothers were able to raise children by using the limited education that they had. Education mainly served to make Bangladeshi women effective mothers. Education is not prioritized for women and served a different purpose for girls: being able to educate their children. In the case of Shahjan Begum she was unable to stay in school and complete her education, saying that “my father was very religious and said that he didn’t want to let his daughter continue her education. Getting married young was difficult and I didn’t know how to take care of the household in my in-laws’ house. It was hard for me to accept everything at first.”<sup>46</sup> For Begum, a significant part of taking care of the household was raising her children properly. Since her husband was working abroad, she made sure the kids were doing their homework and took care of their needs. “My husband was working, I had to make sure that they were not only doing their homework, but also praying and reading Arabic.”<sup>47</sup> Since men are away at work there is no one else there to help children get an education. Thus, women needed to be educated so that they could teach their children. Having an education was a basic skill for women that is only useful for them in order to maintain a successful family life.

Women gave up their own education so that they could take care of their families. Though it was rare, women did pursue higher education but only after fulfilling their

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<sup>45</sup>Kaari Flagstad Baluja, *Gender Roles at Home and Abroad the Adaptation of Bangladeshi Immigrants*, (New York: LFB Scholarly Pub., 2003) 156.

<sup>46</sup>Shahajan Begum, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022. Queens, New York.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

responsibilities as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. Firoza Akter recounts that her mother, who got married at the age of 17, had six children before being able to continue her education again. Akter's father lived abroad and was rarely home with his family. "My mother is the one, actually, who was teaching us and everything, because she was in the middle of her college, and at that time she got married, and she moved in my father's house,"<sup>48</sup> says Akter. Because Akter's mother began living in her husband's home and had to take care of her blind father-in-law, she had to give up her education. "I couldn't do much of my studies because I got married after my metric exams"<sup>49</sup> Rehana Alam similarly explains. "My husband was away in America, working and I was alone in Bangladesh raising my sons by myself. I had to do everything for them."<sup>50</sup>

### **III. Bangladeshi-American Women's Hardships**

One major concerning factor for Bangladeshi women in New York is the hardships they faced as an immigrant and a woman. These women are caught between two worlds: one pressuring them to assimilate into American culture, and the other demanding that they conform to traditional gender roles. Shama Mubdi says, "We are here in America, but the men still have the old country mentality."<sup>51</sup> Bangladeshi women immigrated to America hoping for independence; however, women who were already married also had a duty to their families, and their husbands expected them to continue to

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<sup>48</sup>Firoza Akter interview by Liz H. Strong, January 22, 2019. Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>49</sup>Rehana Alam, interview by Subat Matin, July 18, 2022, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid. In Bangladesh they follow the British school system therefore, the Metric or SSC exams are taken in tenth grade. Bangladesh has a total of four board exams (each city has these board exams at the same time but the questions are different). If you pass this exam, you get your high school certificate and then qualify for college.

<sup>51</sup>Donatella Lorch, "Between Worlds: New York's Bangladeshis" New York Times (1923-). 1991

uphold older, traditional values. Women therefore had to balance conforming to the traditional gender roles with assimilating into American culture, which was not easy. Ferdoshi Chowdhury, for instance, had a hard time adjusting to her new life as a Bangladeshi woman living in New York. She could not necessarily become a Bangladeshi-American woman because her family still valued the traditional responsibilities of a woman. “Men have more freedom, they can work and I feel like it's more easy for them here. For a woman to work and maintain your culture and religious status is much more difficult.”<sup>52</sup>

Typically, Bangladeshi women who desire jobs often require permission from their husbands or male figures. Bangladeshi culture assumes that women need to be protected from men; therefore, when it came to working outside of the home, women should not interact with any men other than their relatives. Since men are the family's main providers, when making any financial decision, women are required to consult with their husbands as well.<sup>53</sup> A marriage is not considered complete without children, but there is no equal division of labor in a Bangladeshi household: The man is responsible for providing financially for the family, and a woman's sole task is to raise the children and discipline them. The community believes that if a mother works outside of the home, the children ultimately suffer; if a woman should work outside of the home than it should only if the family needs more income. If for any reason a women's job interferes with the housework or inconveniences her husband, then should quit and spend time with her

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<sup>52</sup>Ferdoshi Chowdhury, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022, Queens, New York.

<sup>53</sup>Kaari Flagstad Baluja, *Gender Roles at Home and Abroad the Adaptation of Bangladeshi Immigrants*, (New York: LFB Scholarly Pub., 2003) 115.

family.<sup>54</sup> “Since I was not working, I took care of my kids until they got older. While my husband was at work, I would make sure the kids were doing their homework and taking care of them. Since my husband would be at work, I used to be extra careful of my kids,” explains Shahajan Begum.<sup>55</sup> In terms of family life, Bangladeshi women do not have a choice and must stick to the traditional responsibilities.

Without work, it was difficult for women to adapt to American life. Women usually found it harder to adjust to American society because they were isolated from people. Before marriage, Ferdoshi Chowdhury worked as a babysitter and a tutor from home. But after marriage she never worked again. “It’s not easy for women to work,” she claims.<sup>56</sup> “I never worked outside and only stayed at home. My husband didn’t like it either,”<sup>57</sup> says Shahajan Begum. “When I came to Brooklyn,” Rehana Alam explained, “I tried to work outside at first, but it never happened. My husband didn’t let me either. He told me that I didn’t have to work and that he was making more money so he said what you are going to do working.”<sup>58</sup> Whether a woman is a doctor, social worker, or owns a business, their families are always looking down upon them, since a woman’s place is at home. “In our society, it is very difficult for a man to see a woman independent.”<sup>59</sup> “You many work and earn a living, but if you come in front of men to talk, you are shameless. Aggressiveness means you have no moral character. It is like a master-servant

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid, 115.

<sup>55</sup>Shahajan Begum, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022. Queens, New York.

<sup>56</sup>Ferdoshi Chowdhury, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022, Queens, New York.

<sup>57</sup>Shahajan Begum, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022. Queens, New York.

<sup>58</sup>Rehana Alam, interview by Subat Matin, July 18, 2022, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>59</sup>Donatella Lorch, “Between Worlds: New York’s Bangladeshis” *New York Times* (1923-). 1991.

relationship.<sup>60</sup> These attitudes towards Bangladeshi women are part of their daily lives and many have started to question and evaluate their relationships with their families and community.

Often times Bangladeshi- American woman feel trapped in their marriages because they have to follow cultural traditions. “Marriage is a contract, a social duty. In our society if a woman divorces, the blame is always with the woman. The whole society feels pity for the man” explains Syeda Khaliq.<sup>61</sup> Some women could not easily escape marriage because it brought shame to the community and family, which in some cases might make it dangerous for them. In 1991, a woman named Noor Ahmed was killed by a Bangladeshi housekeeper who was hired by the family. Mohammed Lokman Uddin, the housekeeper was later arrested for killing Mrs. Ahmed. In the case of Noor Ahmed, she felt trapped because her family members knew she was unhappy and wanted a divorce; however, her family encouraged to stay in the marriage because if she got a divorce, no one would marry her daughter. Her husband, Mr. Ahmed, also forbade her from getting a divorce because it goes against tradition.<sup>62</sup> After the death of Noor Ahmed, Bangladeshi- American women in the community realized that although a woman’s place is better in New York than in Bangladesh, women are still being ruled by old tradition.<sup>63</sup>

Unmarried Bangladeshi immigrant women faced related challenges in other parts of the U.S. Kanwal Rahman did not know what to imagine when immigrating to the

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

United States for her education. Without any family or friends Rahman first landed in JFK airport in 1991 and then moved to North Carolina to begin her graduate degree at UNC-Chapel Hill. “I had no clue what I was coming into, just that I was accepted and I'm going. I wasn't mentally prepared for living alone and doing everything alone with very little help.”<sup>64</sup> Coming from a family of five sisters and no brothers, she had always been dependent on her father and other male family members. Rahman, like other Bangladeshi women, had been secluded from certain aspects of daily life when compared to American women. “You are not allowed to drive, because your father forbade you, so you come to United States not being able to drive. You can't—, you can't go out and do grocery shopping, because you've never done it, so you have to learn that. You have never cooked in your life because somebody had always cooked—whether it's your mother, or whether it was somebody.”<sup>65</sup> This made immigrating and assimilating to a new country with a different culture and language difficult. Because it was unfathomable in Bangladeshi society for women to be or become independent, they found independence elusive, it not impossible, to achieve.

The lack of independence brought on feelings of insecurity. Since Bangladesh was generally a patriarchal society, being an unmarried immigrant woman living alone in America was overwhelming. “The feeling of insecurity as a single Asian woman in America, for the future, or for anything or, you know, the fact that we don't have a support system—is there.”<sup>66</sup> Bangladeshi women have more responsibilities in America

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<sup>64</sup>Kanwal Rahman, interview by Rajika Bhandari, July 15, 1999, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

because they have to adjust from living in a patriarchal society where everything is done for them to becoming independent. “Patriarchal family is fine, but I guess it's the feeling of insecurity and being used to a patriarchal society, I still assume that it's the male's—which I don't see in America all the time—to look after the family or household, because that's the role that had always been playing from the very beginning.”<sup>67</sup> Bangladeshi women learn fairly fast how to be on their own and not expect American society to do it for them. With no support system and having to learn how to do everything by themselves it can be extremely isolating.

Having to learn English often meant that Bangladeshi-American women faced a period of isolation after arriving to the U.S. Bangladeshi men picked up some English as they progressed through school but women, since they were taken out of school early, learned little or no English before arriving to the U.S. Even after arrival, women found it difficult to learn English, as they were encouraged to stay home. This meant that immigrant women did not go anywhere without their husbands or children's help. “I didn't learn how to speak English because I was scared,”<sup>68</sup> Shahajan Begum revealed. “I didn't go anywhere by myself, even if I went to the doctors. I can understand a little but can't speak it. I was hard for me because I didn't know what to do by myself.”<sup>69</sup> Rehana Alam, too “couldn't understand English that much.”<sup>70</sup> Bangladeshi immigrant women might have understood what someone was saying to them in English but they did not

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Shahajan Begum, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022. Queens, New York.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Rehana Alam, interview by Subat Matin, July 18, 2022, Brooklyn, New York.

know how to reply. This was a reality for many and it took years for them to learn English at a level where they could comfortably converse with others.

#### **IV. The Struggles of Immigrant Bangladeshi Mothers in the United States**

In Bangladeshi culture women were normally in charge of raising children, teaching them about culture and religion, and making sure the family and the household were taken care of. This was true even after they immigrated to New York. “I stayed home by myself with my sons and did all the housework. Even if I felt bad, I did not have the time to be sad about it. I always worked at home and dedicated my time with my sons,”<sup>71</sup> says Rehana Alam. Attitudes toward motherhood and gender attitudes, including female seclusion and the protection of a woman’s honor, which stemmed from the Bangladeshi interpretation of Islamic ideologies, often conflicted with American culture. “Bangladeshi women live through purdah [veiling or dressing modestly] and the teachings of Islam and women here don’t do that which is why it was harder raising my children here,” mentions Shahajan Begum.<sup>72</sup> Being isolated made pregnancy difficult for Bangladeshi women. Farida Matin, who longed to be with her sisters and mother, felt the hardship of living in America when pregnant.<sup>73</sup> “When I got pregnant with my first child, my first daughter. I couldn’t eat anything or cook. I threw up a lot. One time I was throwing up so much I became almost senseless.”<sup>74</sup> Her husband, Rashed used to work an odd job and wanted to take the day off to help her. But she was not expecting the

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<sup>71</sup>Rehana Alam, interview by Subat Matin, July 18, 2022, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>72</sup>Shahajan Begum, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022. Queens, New York.

<sup>73</sup>Farida Matin, interview by Subat Matin, August 8, 2022, Manassas, Virginia.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.



response her husband's boss gave him. "He said that your wife is an adult she knows how to take care of herself and you can't take off for that."<sup>75</sup> Farida knew that her husband had to go to work no matter what. With no support or anyone to take care of Farida she was alone once again.<sup>76</sup>

Many immigrant Bangladeshi mothers had to work outside the home while also taking care of the home. Neak Chowdhurey, for example, came to the United States in 1981 with her husband. Being one of the first Bangladeshi families moving to Brooklyn and the exception of her time, Neak began working outside of the home.<sup>77</sup> While she lived in Bangladesh Neak did not have to work, but after coming to America she immediately began working because the family needed income. "My husband used to study and never worked. So, I would have to work. I worked, took care of my son, and did all the housework. No matter how late it was at night."<sup>78</sup> Neak's family was not doing well financially and because her husband had so many student loans taken out, he did not have enough money to provide for his family. "People can call me a man or woman since immigrating to America I had to do everything by myself, says Neak.<sup>79</sup>

Bangladeshi women who were first-time mothers had a harder time adjusting to their life because of the pressures they face while raising kids and dealing with other obstacles. After immigrating to the United States in 1993, Ferdoshi Chowdhury felt the

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Neak Chowdhurey, interview by Subat Matin, July 17, 2022, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

difficulties of being a first-time mother in 1998 when her daughter was born. At the age of 21 Ferdoshi did not know how to raise a child alongside taking care of her husband and in-laws. “It was hard for me being a wife and also being a mom. I also have my in laws living with me. So yeah, there was lots of issue was going on.”<sup>80</sup> Ferdoshi adjusted, but new issues arose. In 2005, Ferdoshi had her third child. She was now “taking care of three kids, taking care of my husband, taking care in-laws staying there. I have my father-in-law, mother-in-law and two brothers in-law.”<sup>81</sup> “It wasn't easy” for Ferdoshi.<sup>82</sup> “I used to handle everything because he works at night. When he would come home, he used to sleep then he would go back to work again. Then in the middle of the night in 2005 my house caught on fire.”<sup>83</sup> This was an emotional time for Ferdoshi; while it was difficult for her to raise children and be a good wife, she at the same time came to really respect and love her in-laws. For Bangladeshi mothers like Farida and Ferdoshi even if they were living as immigrants in America for a while, they were still expected to follow the traditional gender expectations for women. This would not change until the Bangladeshi-American daughters of their generation grew up and challenged gender norms.

As mothers, Bangladeshi women hoped that their daughters would have more freedom and opportunities. It is important to not only acknowledge the struggles of women like Farida and Ferdoshi, but also recognize the opportunities they wanted their daughters to have. Raising a daughter in America meant allowing her to live a more

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<sup>80</sup>Ferdoshi Chowdhury, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022, Queens, New York.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

successful life and that meant extending their boundaries when it came to opportunities. In 1981, the Gomes family moved to New York from their village in Bangladesh. The family hoped that “America would provide the three daughters with possibilities that did not exist back home.”<sup>84</sup> Magdalene Gomes was the first Bangladeshi student to achieve the top rank in her graduating class in New York City and serve as the school valedictorian. Her mother Martha says, “back home girls are not given much to do. Here it is better for them.”<sup>85</sup> Magdalene got a full scholarship to Columbia University that required her to live on campus but had to turn it down in order to stay closer to her parents. Instead, she accepted to go to New York University where she can live at home because her parents need her help. The Gomes only speak Bengali and therefore, require Magdalene’s help when it comes to speaking English. Their two older daughters also graduated high school and are attending university.<sup>86</sup> Achievements such as Magdalene’s allow other Bangladeshi mothers to believe that one day that their children could do the same. Coming from an immigrant family they want their kids to succeed in order for them to have things they could not. Making sure their daughters do not fall into the same cycle of traditional gender barriers assures Bangladeshi mothers that some parts of their struggles were not meaningless.

Since mothers were in charge of teaching the next generation maintaining Bangladeshi culture and ensuring that their children are following Bangladeshi traditions was important. For many women preserving the Bangla language and teaching children

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<sup>84</sup>Neil A. Lewis, “Immigrant Achieves Top Rank In Class: Bangladeshi Student Tops Her Class” New York Times (1923-). 1989.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

about their heritage was a responsibility many took seriously and felt joy in. “I never had it in my mindset that I had to behave like an American so I stayed by myself and I taught my son how to speak Bangla and learn to appreciate Bangladeshi culture.”<sup>87</sup> However, there was a lot of pressure placed on mothers to pass on traditions such as music, dance, and history. The Bangladeshi community believed that if a mother did not teach these values, then the culture would fade away.<sup>88</sup> Some women thus were afraid that they were incorrectly teaching their children and that this would lead them to follow American culture and forget about their own. “I wanted to be more careful because my kids came to this country and I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to raise my kids the right way,” states Shahajan Begum.<sup>89</sup> “I didn’t really let go of my Bangladeshi traditions and I don’t want to lose my Bengali culture.”<sup>90</sup> Most Bangladeshi women lived (and continue to live) through purdah and the teachings of Islam. But it was not easy for them to pass on Bangladeshi culture to their children in the U.S. given the diversity within American society. And, so, mothers worried that their children would pick up “poor” habits. The hopes of mothers were not limited to their own kids, but grandchildren as well. “I made sure my kids learned how to speak Bangla at home with us and that they were also praying. I wanted them to learn Bangla and about our religion. It was in my will to make my kids and my grandkids learn about Bangladeshi culture and preserve it.”<sup>91</sup> Holding

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<sup>87</sup>Neak Chowdhurey, interview by Subat Matin, July 17, 2022, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>88</sup>Annie Ferdous, interview by Liz H. Strong, May 25, 2018. Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>89</sup>Shahajan Begum, interview by Subat Matin, July 5, 2022. Queens, New York.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

onto culture and religion was a way for Bangladeshi to be good mothers and allow them to carry on their beliefs and show love for the country they left behind.

## **V. Conclusion**

Throughout the 1970s and 1990s the Bangladeshi community rapidly grew, not only in New York but also in the United States more broadly. However, the stories about the life and difficulties of Bangladeshi immigrant women have been overlooked by historians. While later generations saw shifts in gender roles, these immigrant women valued and were expected more often than not to follow traditional Bangladeshi culture. There was an emphasis on marriage, struggle with motherhood, and also seclusion from the outside world. Bangladeshi women sacrificed personal interests to take care of husbands, children, and extended families, making their lives as an immigrant particularly difficult. Despite it all, these immigrant women had the strength to push through obstacles and persevere. They paved the way for subsequent generations of Bangladeshi-American women to break free from the cultural restrictions of the past and fulfill their dreams.

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