

Golden Mile

Kajal Nisha Patel questions her own cultural identity as she explores the Asian community of Belgrave in Leicester. Words: **Ric Bower**

Ric Bower: Your involved approach to portraiture is intriguing, is this approach due to your own upbringing in Belgrave and your sense of belonging to two cultures?

Kajal Nisha Patel: I didn't grow up in Belgrave itself. I grew up in an area that was predominantly white. Going into Belgrave I felt more at home in some ways. The school I went to was predominantly white; maybe there were a fifth or a sixth of us that had ethnic-minority backgrounds. Going into Asian areas, at that age, I definitely felt like something had been missing from my life.

My parents wanted to enforce Indian-ness upon us so that 'we wouldn't lose our culture,' but I don't think they knew what that really meant. For them culture was ritualistic things, like wearing Indian clothes on the weekends. We almost had to 'make time' to be Indian, so it was still quite separate from our actual experience. People around us, I found for the most part, didn't understand anything about Indian culture or the history between England and India. It simply wasn't on our national curriculum in Leicester.

Essentially my practice is a single, ongoing project. I'm trying to get my head around the younger generation of British Asians at the moment and I am wondering if they are going through the same kind of crisis of identity that I did.

RB: You categorise the different generations within the *Golden Mile* project with labels like 'The Inbetweeners' and 'the First Generation'. How do you categorise yourself?

KNP: I think I would be an 'Inbetweener'. When you're in India, people don't necessarily

see you as Indian. I always felt like I had to prove something when I went back. The language, for instance: I consider myself quite fluent in my mother tongue but, because I don't speak it every day and the dialect is different, I can stutter occasionally, which they pick up on. I always felt like I just wanted to blend in and integrate – I didn't want that feeling of displacement; I wanted to immerse myself in Indian culture. It came as a bit of an epiphany that, although I didn't quite fit into either culture, that that was OK. Someone asked me if I would see myself as being more British or more Indian. I would say I am both 100% British and 100% Indian; I don't feel the need to choose. I feel I can be 100% present in both national identities, wherever I am in the world.

The longest time I have spent in India was eight months while I did an internship for an NGO [Non Governmental Organisation] in Gujarat. At the time, I wasn't a full-time photographer; I wanted the experience to influence my emerging practice. I didn't really know what documentary storytelling was, in the traditional sense. It was a really intense, soul-searching period. I was both assimilating a visual language and immersing myself in issues of social change at the same time.

Poverty is something that interests a lot of people in my generation. I realised very quickly though, that taking a few photographs wasn't really going to achieve anything on its own.

RB: That's an interesting point. In your mind then, what does photography have to offer humanity now? For much of the twentieth century, there existed this idea, that you could record certain 'decisive moments' with a camera, and they carried the potential to be instrumental in societal change.

KNP: I don't have a traditional academic understanding of photography. So everything I know is from what I've experienced. I think the future lies in technology; I've started a social enterprise called Light Seekers, we want to create a live connection between two schools, one in India and the other in the UK.

RB: You're self-taught, what does that mean and how does it inform your approach?

KNP: It means I'm not bound by the traditions and expectations of the industry. I don't look for editorial work and I don't try to fit myself into the mould of what a photographer 'should be'.

RB: Your practice operates from within your own community, you are embedded, how does this work for you?

KNP: It has its downsides but also it has its advantages; it's great being able to speak the language and, being a woman, people are less threatened when I am there with a camera. On the downside I find myself assuming that a lot of the things I'm seeing and experiencing are a given. I have also come to the realisation that I am always observing events through the filter of my own mind and my own experience anyway. — **CCQ**

Kajal Nisha Patel presented and talked about her work at The Eye Festival at Aberystwyth Arts Centre in June 2014.

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lightseekers.co.uk
theeyefestival.co.uk





All images:
Golden Mile I and Golden Mile II,
Kajal Nisha Patel







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