

## Do young people belong in museums?

Sadia Habib in conversation with Our Shared Cultural Heritage young collective

00:00:00 Hawwa

In reality, I always, I feel like I feel more represented by the hyphen than the actual words, like you know when it's like British-Asian, I feel more like I belong in that, like, weird space between the two words because I am Asian, but I've never been to India, I've been to Pakistan like once, and I've lived in Britain my whole life, but realistically do Britain want me here? Who knows anymore, like I'm Muslim, I'm hijabi, I'm Brown, like every time I look at that form, I always have another identity crisis for want of a better word.

00:00:49 Lowell Wallbank

Today on the podcast we are joined by members of the OSCH Collective. OSCH, or Our Shared Cultural Heritage, is a National Lottery funded partnership led by the British Council, giving young people the opportunity to explore the shared cultural heritage of the UK and South Asia and develop new methods of engagement. Working with the Manchester Museum, the collective aim to tackle the under representation of young people as audiences, participants and volunteers in the heritage sector.

In this episode, we hear from collective members Hawwa, Hannah, Afzal, Helen and Sibia, who are in conversation with project coordinator Sadia Habib.

00:01:33 Sadia Habib

Since I started in spring 2019 as the OSCH Coordinator at Manchester Museum, we've worked with hundreds of young people to support them in leading on activities, events and campaigns that they find useful and relevant to themselves, to their peers and their community. Moreover, many of these young people have helped us change policies and practices at the museum to fulfil our museum values of inclusivity, care and imagination. In 2019 I set up a young collective at Manchester Museum and I'm delighted to be joined by some of the fantastic members of the collective here today. We've been talking a lot about belonging on this project, and a lot of the young people-

led work we do centres around what it means to belong to Britain as a young South Asian person as long as what it means to belong to a museum space. So today, we'll be covering these two key ideas in our conversation.

One of the first questions I want to throw out there to you is what does belonging mean to you? And how does your sense of belonging change, depending on place or space?

00:02:48 Hawwa

I think my sense of belonging is conditional on the people that surround me rather than the place I'm in, because to me, belonging just means being comfortable, regardless of whether I'm around people that are of the same identity as me.

00:03:02 Hannah

Yeah, same. My sense of belonging is definitely dynamic and it changes all the time. It depends on context and, yeah, I would definitely base it on people rather than places.

00:03:15 Afzal

The idea of comfort and the people you're surrounded with, kind of allowing you to belong in the specific spaces. I think that's really interesting because I felt that my time University just generally being surrounded with like-minded people with similar backgrounds and feeling more comfortable and more at home, I guess. Yeah.

00:03:37 Hawwa

I just wanted to make a point about Afzal said about Uni and also how I was talking about people making a space rather than the topic that's like being talked about, because I studied history at University and even though I was being taught my own history, it never felt like I belonged in that space because it wasn't constructed for me. It was just constructed about me and even then, it was like quite stereotypical, Eurocentric perspectives of me. Which is why I really liked coming to OSCH because it felt much more comfortable because I was around other, even just other Brown people because I was doing quite white dominated course. And even the lecturers teaching me my history weren't from that background. So, there was this weird, like, uncomfortable, like binary of, okay, I should feel comfortable because they're teaching me about things I want to learn and it's about my history, like I'm half Indian, half Pakistani, so when we're learning about like partition, it affected both of my sides of my families quite differently. But then, I'm sitting in that classroom and I feel like I can't even ask a question, or I can't say my points because no one will want to listen to me. So yeah, I think even though, I

used to think that space, being in a space about you was enough to feel belonging until I went to uni, and that just sort of ended that, like, weird illusion that I had, and that's why I really liked coming to OSCH because it was such a different atmosphere and environment and it felt much more like conducive to discussion in a non-judgmental and very, like, open, progressive, like let's talk about it, in a space where people will actually want to listen to you.

00:05:19 Hannah

Yeah, being Spanish and South African-Indian and growing up in a predominantly white city in the UK, and also studying a very white course that was historically developed during colonialism at University. I study geography. I think this also contributes to like my dynamic sense of belonging, and yeah, when I joined OSCH, I think I had, like, an acute flare up of, like, my identity crisis, because I feel like I'm so kind of struggling with claiming these parts of who I am, and whether, like, I even have a right to claim it, just because I feel I've been so removed from it growing up and so, yeah, I kind of worry that I carry this impostor syndrome with me into these spaces, but actually, just being a part of OSCH has made me feel more involved in what constitutes heritage, and it has helped me to nurture my understanding of community and belonging, which also as a person of mixed heritage, actually is something that we really struggle with.

00:06:17 Sadia Habib

Thank you so much, Hannah, for that contribution. And, I think one of the main goals for OSCH, for me is exactly what you just said Hannah, for young people and other people who come to our events, for example, to understand identity is complex and evolving and shifting and changing according to different spaces as Hawwa alluded to. I don't think that we can pigeon hole ourselves as just having one single identity, our identities are multiple, especially for young people who are South Asian and British.

I'm going to just bring in Helen here at this point because I know that Helen's identity is really interesting to her sense of belonging because she's got Bangladeshi heritage, and she grew up in Italy and then moved to Manchester. Helen would you like to share a little bit about how you feel about your sense of belonging? Do you belong to Italy? To the UK? Bangladesh? Or all three?

00:07:30 Helen

That's a difficult question, I feel like belonging feels natural and you feel included and not forced to fit in, so for me it's more about acceptance of people for who they are, and, they got into Italy, only few people seem to appreciate my heritage. And so, in here, like I was really amazed on how people are like, inclusive with one another and I felt like a

little bit segregated in Italy, so yeah, it is a little bit difficult with Bangladeshi and South Asian heritage because I don't really speak about much, but thanks to the OSCH and the Ananna, I took a more interest and I also got my DNA test and I feel like it's more than I thought it would be, more yeah.

00:08:53 Sadia Habib

That's so interesting, Helen, why do you think if you don't mind me asking, why do you think prior to OSCH, before getting involved in OSCH, you didn't really reflect upon or explore, or think about your Bengali heritage as much as you now do?

00:09:09 Helen

Like, I felt ashamed to be a South Asian girl and I was much ridiculed for my skin colour and my traditions. And so yeah, I thought that I had to change for them, but for me belonging, it's like you have to accept yourself and, you be you.

00:09:42 Sadia Habib

That's really, that's really, really sad and I'm sorry you had to go through that, and I think you're not alone there, Helen. I think so many young people, if I think about my nieces and my nephews as well, they have that same experience where they go to school and they encounter racism and a Eurocentric curriculum, so they leave school, or they come out of school feeling that they've not really, fully explored their heritage, or it's not being valued or celebrated, and perhaps even like you said, feel shame about being South Asian and having this whole different heritage, whether it be Bengali, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, Indian and so on. So I think spaces like OSCH as Hannah and Hawwa have alluded to already are really important for young people like yourself, Helen, to explore your heritage, and celebrate it, and look at the complexities, and think about it critically as you have been doing with some of the other young people when you've been exploring colourism, for example, so it's looking at your own community critically, but also the outside world and other communities and how they intersect, or influence, or disrupt your sense of belonging. So, I'm really, really glad to hear that you guys have found OSCH to be beneficial in this respect because that was one of my very, very big goals from the beginning to make sure that young people, like yourselves get to really, really reflect upon, and discuss aspects of heritage, and culture, and identity, and belonging in ways that are complex and move away from, like, simple stereotypes that often we feel like society thrusts upon us.

Right, I'm going to bring Sibia in at this point. Sibia, would you like to share something about your thoughts on belonging, belonging to Oldham, belonging in the University like Hawwa and Hannah mentioned?

00:11:57 Sibia

As I say, and like Hawwa, I also studied history and we had quite similar experiences in the sense like we were often quite, the only, like, person of colour in history, and you felt like that sort of pressure to be a voice of all South Asia, which it shouldn't be the case because my view wouldn't be like same as everyone else view, would it? So, like I just, I guess that those times at uni, I didn't really feel like I belonged in those spaces, and I just didn't feel like I should speak in those spaces either, because they just didn't feel as comfortable. But then, like with OSCH, then is like a space with all of us, that speak about our own views and work on projects that we want to work on, or not because we're told you work on, that's what, that's my highlight with working as part of OSCH, so I really like how we have quite like, a lot of autonomy, like what we want to work on, what we want to talk about, what we want to share, who you want to involve with our projects, and that's something that's really key with working with young people.

00:13:04 Sadia Habib

Thank you Sibia. Hannah, I have a question for you about the different array of ethnicities that you referred to. So, how do you feel about labels like 'mixed heritage', and do you relate to a label like 'mixed heritage'? And the second part to my question, is the different ethnicities you mentioned, do you feel a stronger affinity to any of those or not?

00:13:32 Hannah

So yeah, I definitely like to prefer to identify myself as mixed heritage, I have a mixed race because, I'm not sure if, I can't remember his name, but he does the hashtag #BothNotHalf, and so by saying that he's, like, not half of anything, he's not opening himself up to accusations of not being enough, and so, like I really related with this way that he described being of mixed heritage, and I've never really grown up in South Africa, India or Spain. I've only ever grown up in the UK and as I said before, in a very white, predominantly white town, and so I don't know, it's really difficult, I've definitely felt more removed from my dad's side, which is the South African-Indian side, also because he was also very removed from it growing up, because he grew up under apartheid, so he was sent to boarding school in the UK when he was very young and because of that he kind of grew up in Britain and went to uni here, etc., so, I think because he is also felt quite removed from it, I haven't grown up with the cultural traditions on that side really, and also being very far away from relatives, so yeah, it's really difficult question to answer, sorry.

00:14:53 Sadia Habib

No, no, that's fine, I think you've answered it really well there by highlighting again, how complex and difficult these topics and discussions on identity and belonging are, they're not as simplistic as society sometimes makes out, so I think it's really important that we're having this conversation and like you said, there's no quick fix answers when people talk about their own identities, but you very nicely led me on to thinking about South Asia and South Asian countries, and I wanted to know if any of you have visited any South Asian countries, and did you feel a sense of belonging there or not?

00:15:34 Afzal

I just recently last summer actually, went to Pakistan for like, the first time in five or six years maybe, and it was a really interesting experience because I got to experience it from, as someone that's like kinda, more firm in my identity, I guess, I felt I was firm identity at the time, before I went actually, but then I had like few little experiences here and there where it made me genuinely question, you know there's a kind of like cliché diaspora thing, like where do I belong? You know, like kind of existing in this this kind of void of nowhere, neither here nor there. And I went there and everybody just knows that you're not from Pakistan. They can smell the foreignness on you like, I went to a barber's shop for example, and as soon as I sat down, I was completely silent and I just, I'm relatively fluent in my mother tongue, so I just told him I needed a haircut, and the first thing he asked me was, like how long have you been here? Literally, I've never met this man in my life and he's, he just already knew that I was foreign. And another time my parents went to do some clothes shopping and my mum was like haggling like you they do, the kind of give and take of haggling, and the guy said to her, oh, you guys are from the UK, like why you haggling, like you have so much money and I was like, how did he know, like, my parents were brought up in Pakistan so like, they're more native than I am, so it was really interesting to see how people knew we were foreign and kind of had these preconceived notions of who we are, and how much money we have, and how well off we are, I guess, which is not true, cause I'm broke. But yeah, it was really interesting, and then that genuinely made me question like I thought I was firm before that, I thought that yeah, I'm Pakistani, man, but then that trip made me genuinely question everything I am to deep, on a deep level and, like Hannah, I went through an identity crisis too, I guess. I guess we all kinda do at some point, and to carry on from Helen's point, which is really interesting about the kind of self-hatred that comes with these kind of variety of identities, and kind of disliking the South Asian side, or even any kind of side of us that's other, I think it's true I can genuinely, I can relate to that in a deep level, I think most of us can, the idea, you know of not wanting to be Pakistani and not wanting to associate with any identity that's not normal, quote, unquote, normal, which is kind of white British, I guess that's the norm for us to some extent, so, yeah, I can definitely relate to that and it's just still, I'm still in the process of trying to figure stuff out, so I'm not a point where I can comfortably say what I am because I don't know, man, I generally don't know but I'll figure it out one day, maybe.

00:18:37 Hawwa

I have never been to India, both my parents were brought up in the UK, I have been to Pakistan when I was five, four, maybe, so like, I don't remember at all but even here in like, Brown spaces, I still, I can't even like handle that like, cause I don't feel like a very full South Asian because I can't speak any, I can only speak English like Mum speaks Gujarati at home so I understand it but I can't speak it and if I try it just sounds so wrong coming out my mouth. I'm like this doesn't sound normal, because I'm not used to it so even around friends that speak to Punjabi at home, I'm that girl, I'm literally like that friend that knows nothing, like I don't know what's going on. I can't understand any of the Bollywood references that they're talking about, they're talking to their parents and I have to like try really hard to see if any words are similar to Gujarati, even when sometimes, because I live quite near like a predominantly Asian area and I'll get my bus to college there, and I remember all that I'm like aunties would come up to be an ask me like what time the bus is coming, and like do I know the bus timetable and I would not understand what they're telling me and they would look so ashamed at my like, lack of ability to understand them even though if they spoke in Gujarati to me then maybe I would have understood it, but they just assume that I'd know Urdu and Punjabi because it's like the most common languages, and that always made me feel even more like empty as a South Asian because I would literally sit there and be like, some of my English friends know more like, Urdu and Punjabi than me because they like around it more often than me. So yeah, I would always just sit there and think like, I always say that I'm South Asian but actually makes me a South Asian because for a lot of people here it's their language, like obviously it's about the food and everything like that, but languages what like ties everyone together, and because I can't join that, I'm always the outsider, even in spaces that are meant to be for me. So yeah, it's a weird, I again, I don't know who I am, another identity crisis happening over here.

00:20:37 Sadia Habib

I feel like crisis is such a difficult word to use though, because I feel like it is, I don't feel like it is a crisis, I feel like it's the norm and I feel like we've been led to believe that it is a crisis if you don't belong to one place so you don't have one ancestry, one single ethnic identity, we've been kind of socialised into thinking that, but you're having a cultural clash, or you're having a crisis, and I honestly think it's the norm. I think it's more, and it's increasingly becoming the norm to have these different influences and attachments and infinities, and negotiating them in different ways and negotiating the tensions, negotiating the positive aspects, celebrating it, and so on.

I'm now interested in kind of pursuing the second part of discussions that we've had or been having ongoing discussions about the museum sector, the heritage sector, and how you feel about belonging to museums. So, during the preliminary consultation to

pave the way for OSCH, the British Council found that while themes of identity and belonging are important to young people, many young people do not see heritage organisations as sites to explore cultural heritage and perhaps they find that home and community spaces give them more opportunity to share stories about heritage than museums. And was this the case for you guys, pre-OSCH? What was your experience of museums or even belonging to museums?

00:22:31 Helen

I thought that it was reserved for high class people, and not for people that come from low or middle people, I don't know how should I call them but, it's more of elitist, think that it is reserved for the more sophisticated and a little bit pretentious as well. This is the thing.

00:23:05 Sadia Habib

So that was your kind of impression pre-OSCH of museums as being pretentious associated with middle classes or upper classes, elitist places. Anybody else, did you have any kind of encounters with the museum or museums and what were your feelings towards museums, or even did you feel like you could belong to a museum? Afzal?

00:23:29 Afzal

For me, I guess museums are kind of always been, I've always visited museums, I guess, like all of us through our lives, and I've never felt like I could have a space there or, I don't know. I just felt like they're overwhelmingly white spaces. And, the idea that I could have a job there, just seemed so far-fetched to me. I don't know why, maybe just, yeah, it's really interesting to see, like with OSCH especially, how it kind of exposed me to the possibilities of working within the museum sector, and just, and with things like, I've been having meetings with like Museum Detox and all these different organisations and just seeing how vocal we as people of colour become. I don't know if you become that, maybe I'm just more aware of it, not to say that we were silent before, but I just, it's refreshing and it makes me feel warm inside to see like, these structures being questioned and critiqued, so it's really interesting, I guess. I feel like we're in a state of flux like, things are just changing right now, and it's positive change and I'm here for it. And yeah, it's a nice place to be, but at the same time there is a lot to be done.

00:24:49 Sadia Habib

And we're so glad that you're here for it, Afzal, and I'm so, so impressed with all the opportunities you've been taking up all of you, all of you. Some of you on here, on this



call, on this podcast today are actually interns who are being paid to do museum activities and campaigns and events and lead on things that you're interested in and the rest of you are Young Collective members, and with OSCH we are trying to find as many paid opportunities as possible as well, but Afzal, I really like the fact that when you moved to London, you built on your OSCH experience and have started your work experience at the British Museum. That's really fantastic and, like, I'm pleased that it, that this kind of increasing presence of people, of young people of colour in the heritage sector is giving you this warm, fuzzy feeling that's really good. Hawwa?

00:25:43 Hawwa

So, I actually wrote my dissertation on public spaces and, like representations of history and one of the things I found in my research even, and it just sort of confirmed that I already felt because I've been going to museums since I was a kid like I've been to so many in so many different like cities, but like Helen said, it's such a like an elitist space where you don't feel like you, even if you're looking at something that belongs to your history or heritage, it doesn't feel like it's written for you, and it doesn't feel like you can engage with it in a very complex way, and I think one of the reasons why I never felt like I could belong in a museum space was because there's such a huge emphasis on like tradition and being professional in the way that you're representing history. And whenever I see something that's not traditional in a history, like or just in a museum space in general doesn't necessarily have to be very historical, it's always framed in like a 'oh my gosh, it's ground breaking creative thing' and I feel like that does a disservice to the way that it's represented because it's still being painted as something other, and like alternate to the common narrative of how we're going to represent in museums. Yeah, it's very pretentious, and I feel, I think that really irritated me because every time I went to a museum, it never, it didn't feel like it was trying to be engaging, like it was just trying to paint the picture of a great institution doing great things, but not really for the people that were going. It was more just like a public facade, which is why OSCH was so nice in comparison because it's literally the opposite of all those things I disliked about museums.

00:27:29 Helen

If I can add, like the museums in Italy, you had to pay for the entry. So, imagine from my amazement, when I, like, I can go to the museums in UK like for free, like it wasn't like that in Italy. So, you had to save for everything, school trips are really costly and expensive. So yeah.

00:27:58 Sadia Habib

Yeah, that's really, that's a really good point, actually. I think years ago I remember, actually years ago, museums did charge, but then it makes it, it's so much more important to have this change where museums are more accessible for people in terms of finances. Is there anything else that you guys want to add about heritage spaces in museums and how they can increase the sense of belonging for young people of colour? How can it make you feel more comfortable and belong? Hannah?

00:28:28 Hannah

I think in terms of promoting intergenerational dialogue in particular like the OSCH Collective, especially for young people, because they face greater risk of social and educational exclusion, and so by including voices from young people, from people of colour, we can raise awareness of the barriers that young people face within their education, the schools, universities, curriculums, as you articulated Hawwa earlier, that the Eurocentric perspective that doesn't often represent them and this can affect young people's self-esteem, which ultimately will affect their sense of belonging as well.

00:29:08 Sadia Habib

That's a really good point, thank you Hannah. I think I wholeheartedly agree, I think museums are such important places for young people and young people of colour to critically engaged in dialogue and discussion and interrogate any dominant, kind of mainstream classist, elitist myths about migration, about multi-culturalism, about nation, identity, belonging. And that's a lot of what we've been doing.

To end, it might be quite cool for you guys to maybe all just share a little bit about what your kind of highlight of OSCH been. I'm so glad that you've all had a brilliant OSCH experience and long may that continue. Is there anything in particular that has been a real highlight in terms of making you feel like you can belong to the museum space?

00:30:14 Sibia

I got so many highlights, but I think my favourite one is for South Asian Heritage Month like myself, Afzal and [Safi?] hosted an event on Bengali folk music and we shared it with the public and it was so fun. I think the best part was that the reception we got, like, everyone was like 'oh I didn't know this this existed'. I'm like 'yeah, it does and it so popular' and it was just awesome. And yeah, that was my favourite part of OSCH.

00:30:42 Sadia Habib

Well done, well done to you guys for organising that. Helen?

00:30:47 Helen

For me, the highlight was the colourism workshop, yeah, like I did have the chance to discuss about it with many people and it felt nice, it was like a safe environment where I think I made a lot of friends here as well, so I really, I couldn't expect that from the OSCH or Manchester Museum, I mean the institution like museums.

00:31:23 Sadia Habib

You have Helen, certainly made a lot of friends and we're so glad you joined us after the colourism workshops with your Ananna Youth Group, and we love having you as part of the collective, and you don't feel like your new anymore, it feels like you've been with us for a really long time. And Afzal, highlight?

00:31:47 Afzal

For me it would be when, pre-COVID, when we actually had in person events and I got to host the multilingual poetry event at the Manchester Museum. That was very cool for me because it's like I've been coming to the Manchester Museum for like a couple years since I moved to Manchester at the time, and it was kind of surreal to be hosting an event there. Yeah, it was like wow like, damn, like I could actually do this, you know? So that was pretty cool.

00:32:15 Sadia Habib

That was cool. And I so miss the pre-COVID, us guys meeting in person with everybody, organising planning, doing our events, campaigning, eating, chilling, bant, I miss all that so much. So, I'm really hoping we get to do all that again. Hannah?

00:32:41 Hannah

Well, I haven't been with OSCH for very long, but I would just say my highlight is just having this inclusive space where we can have this dialogue and which can enable us to conceptualise what we actually want museums to look like and ultimately, like reimagine them as spaces for young people and diverse people that can feel included.

00:33:03 Sadia Habib

Thank you, Hannah. That's brilliant. That's perfect. Hawwa?

00:33:08 Hawwa

I think my highlight was during South Asian Heritage Month when me and one of my colleagues Roheema, who's also a digital producer for Manchester Museum did like a history Q&A panel with two history teachers, and it was such a nice like safe space and it was the first time I'd ever been in a room solely of South Asians talking about South Asian history and our experiences with the education curriculum and with, like culture and heritage institutions. And it felt as though like freeing and liberating because I could just exist rather than like have to think about how I am gonna be perceived by what I say because everyone was also on the same wavelength as me, and I feel like that was just like a microcosm of how OSCH is in general, which is what I love the most about OSCH.

00:33:54 Sadia Habib

Thank you, thank you guys. Honestly, it's been such a pleasure having this conversation with you all. So, so fascinating learning about the different facets of our identities, of belonging how we feel about that, how we feel about belonging generally, and also more specifically to the Museum and I'm so, so delighted that you've had so many, kind of positive experiences about the Museum and belonging to the Museum, and I hope we can continue building on that and developing some of these aspects that we've discussed today so, thank you guys.