

# “When you enter the Kabuliwalas’ homes in Kolkata you feel like you’re back in Afghanistan” – Moska Najib



*Inspired by Rabindranath Tagore’s 1892 short story, the Kabuliwala, photographers **Moska Najib** and **Nazes Afroz** spent three years capturing the lives of the Kabuliwalas of Kolkata. **Chris Finnigan** talks to Moska about how their new exhibition in London reveals how generations of Afghan migrants have preserved their Pashtun identities in their new homeland.*

## How did Tagore’s story inspire this photographic project?

Tagore’s short story is about an Afghan merchant who travels through the hinterlands to the city of Kolkata in India to sell dry-fruits. There he ends up befriending a little, Bengali girl called Mini who reminds him of the daughter he left behind in Afghanistan. The story is about their unique bond and friendship. It’s this story that really inspired me. For the majority of my life, while growing up in India, Tagore’s story has been a point of reference and cross-connection in many conversations about Afghans and the historical ties between the two countries. While growing up, often times when I mentioned that I was from Afghanistan, many would either remark about the ongoing conflict or Tagore’s short story.

While I knew of Tagore’s story and how it had been brought to life through translations in several languages, theatre and films, I always saw it as a piece of fiction. I never knew if the Kabuliwala community existed. So that’s when I decided to collaborate with Nazes, who is a photographer and from Kolkata. By capturing their story through a Bengali and Afghan perspective meant that we each brought a very different bearing and gaze to the project as a whole. In 2012, we decided to visit Kolkata and ‘see if this community really exists’.



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**A new home | Credit: Nazes Afroz & Moska Najib**

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**Was there a moment that triggered your interest?**

Having left Afghanistan at an early age, I always felt there was an abrupt disconnection with my roots and hence, a lasting sense of loss. And so throughout my life, I've been drawn to themes of identity and belonging. When the idea of the Kabuliwala emerged in my mind, I wondered how this particular community had held onto, if at all, its identity, and culture. I really wanted to understand if there really was a community or something alike to Tagore's idea. If there was, I wanted to see how they have preserved their roots and sense of belonging.

The fact that this particular story kept being referenced was always at the back of my mind. In 2012, when Nazes and I went to Kolkata we found there were around 5,000 families that spread across the city. They were first, second and third generation migrants who have made Kolkata their home.





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*A license to live | Credit: Nazes Afroz & Moska Najib*

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**Tagore's story is a clear example of the preservation of this group's identity through memory. Did you find other examples beyond reference to the story?**

In one of our trips, we went to one of the Kabuliwala's home and inquired if they had kept any belongings or memories of their forefathers or family members. A Kabuliwala, Sultan Khan, showed us this stunning dress that he had managed to keep which belonged to his mother. It was an Afghan dress, sequenced traditionally in a vibrant red colour. He was so proud because it was the only memory of Afghanistan which he was carrying with him all these years. For me, this photograph is very prominent because you never see a Pashtun man holding something so feminine. And that contrast of nostalgia and of belonging is very poignant and eye-opening in this photograph.

I was also very surprised to enter their homes in Kolkata and feel transported to Afghanistan, in a rural village. Their floors are carpeted, cushions are kept on the sides to rest on, and even the manner in which they have their meals with elaborate settings are all very traditional. I was surprised that they still abide by these traditions despite being born in Kolkata and having lived away from their homeland for over a century.





*In a distant land | Credit: Nazes Afroz & Moska Najib*

**Throughout the project did you discover a performative element to the preservation of the group's identity?**

Yes. The Kabuliwala have really been able to preserve their identity and culture beyond their materialistic possessions. A lot of the Kabuliwalas originally came to Kolkata alone. They left behind their families, so many of them ended up marrying Indian Muslim women. When you meet most of their children, they are Indian, so to speak, but they live a very dual existence: the moment they step out of their homes they are more Bengali, but when they are at home they are the Kabuliwalas.

Additionally, there are many layers of how they've managed to preserve their identity: we captured a photo taken outside the Victoria memorial when every year they come together during the Eid festivities for a big gathering. Here they take part in a traditional circular dance called Attan, which is a folk Pashtun dance. It's rare to see this community perform this rhythmic dance when they have never been back home. Many also speak in Pashto, their local language without any accent or foreign twang to it.

**The Kabuliwala has been fictionalised and romanticised but in reality are members of this group ostracised? Do their public performances and everyday acts amount to political actions?**

I don't believe so, for the mere reason that this community is very secluded. Until we did this exhibition, Bengalis weren't aware that the community really lived in their city. Many Kabuliwalas live a reclusive life and go about their business; they have local shops and trade in goods like dried fruits. Many of them are tailors, too. When we started doing this photography work and when the project gained a lot of prominence, they actually came more into the limelight. There was a lot of interest thereafter which really exposed them, but as a community they are very invisible.





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*Their abode | Credit: Nazes Afroz & Moska Najib*

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**This exhibition very much visualises that invisibility. But there doesn't seem to be any photographs of women. Were you worried you were perpetuating their invisibility?**

Yes, it was a big dilemma. We worked on this project for three years so through that course of time we really tried hard to see the inner worlds of the women – the Kabuliwala women – because it's an entirely different world. We wanted to photograph the Kabuliwala women and the minutiae of their everyday life. We thought it would be fascinating to document their inner lives, how they spent time inside their homes, what occupied them and how they raised their children. But even as a female photographer I was not let in to document them. It's part of the custom and the tradition and we had to respect that.

In the entire exhibition we've only managed to capture two photos of women. One is of an elderly lady and her family, and I think possibly the reason that we were allowed to document her was that she was older in age. Another photo was of a gentleman's family. Although he let us capture his three little children and his wife, on the day of the exhibition opening in Kolkata, that photo went missing. I think this was a very important statement for us to understand that we needed to respect their boundaries. We realised that women will be part of the missing and untold narrative of this project.

Capturing this community as a female photographer, on the other hand, had its own set of challenges. Being from a similar tribal community helped them trust me, however, as a female photographer there was always a lens on me. A female photographer documenting men? That was a challenge at the onset, but over time I built a relationship with the community, gaining their trust and eventually they opened up to letting me document them.



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**Man with dress | Credit: Nazes Afroz & Moska Najib**

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**How did you ensure that your ethnographic method allowed you to represent the Kabuliwala fairly?**

We spent a very long time researching the community and understanding their world without a camera. This project wasn't concluded in just one trip, where we captured some photographs. That would have been the easiest process but to understand the complexity of this community and then to be able to curate this show, we really had to invest the time it deserved. When you do a photography project or any project that deals with migration, it is very easy to highlight what's missing, but in these photographs you will see that we are actually celebrating identity and culture. We are not looking at how they are losing their culture but how they have managed to preserve and maintain a dual existence.



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*In Limbo | Credit: Nazes Afroz & Moska Najib*

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**Do you think the people you have photographed feel free to express their identity in Kolkata?**

I think they go through a very tangled duality of their identities because most of them were born in Kolkata but their culture is very Pashtun. Having said that, they are in a sense stateless. They do not hold Indian passports. In one of our photos there is a man holding his various identity cards: a ration card, a driver's license, an income tax card, but there's no passport. Many also believe that they come from the land of Pashtuns – Pashtunistan – and when you remind them that geographically it doesn't exist, many respond and say, "Well, yes. It does." Their existence is very layered in reality and the perception of what their identity is.



© Moska Najib and Nazes Afroz

**Mini's Kabuliwala | Credit: Nazes Afroz & Moska Najib**



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**The Kabuliwala is a very old story. How do the younger generations in these families relate to their Pashtun and Indian identities?**

Well firstly with the older generation: their lives have evolved since Tagore's story. They have started blending amongst the local community by dining with them or doing business with them. You would never see this in Tagore's world: a Kabuliwala was never allowed to enter a Bengali home, so you see that sort of connectivity happening in the 21st century.

The younger generation does indeed have the same connection with the past. We have a photograph called Father and Son. It shows the son who is born in India and you can see he plays cricket, but his father lives in an inner Kabuliwala world. When the son is at home, he's very Pashtun-like, the minute he steps out, he's very Indian in his nature. That inner world of carpeted floors and big suitcases and trunks, speaking in Pashto and dining in the traditional way, it's a world that they are able to trespass effortlessly.



© Moska Najib and Nazes Afroz

***The Maidan | Credit: Nazes Afroz & Moska Najib***



## How did those you photographed react when you showed them your work?

We interviewed the chieftain of the community and he was very kind to us because they really are a very reclusive community. We feel we brought out their story positively and it's helped the locals see them in a very different light: not as strangers to be feared of, but as neighbours to coexist with.

At a thematic level, these photographs connect viewers to the sense of the universality of human bonding, love and affection and a tribute to memory and belonging of our innate identities. We've been all familiar with the idea of the 'other' and the story of the Kabuliwala highlights this aspect of human migration.

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*This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

*[From Kabul to Kolkata: Of Belonging, Memories and Identity](#) will be exhibited at the Brunei Gallery at SOAS until 15 December 2018. Admission is free. Open: Tuesday – Sunday: 10.30 – 17.00, Late night Thursday until 20:00. Closed: Mondays and Bank Holidays*



**Moska Najib** is an experienced writer, photographer and public relations professional having worked across a variety of media platforms. A keen traveler and photographer, her photo-features have appeared on several publications online and in print. A former journalist, Moska has been recognised for working with colleagues from disparate cultural backgrounds, leading teams in multimedia production and field producing. Moska was born in Afghanistan and although she has lived most of her life outside of her homeland, she is deeply rooted in Afghan history, culture, and traditions.



**Nazes Afroz** is primarily a print and a broadcast journalist from Kolkata, and a keen photographer for almost three decades. He started working for a newspaper in Kolkata before moving on to the BBC World Service in London where he lived for nearly fifteen years. Nazes has been documenting communities and people through his photographs, which have appeared in various publications and on the BBC and Al-Jazeera websites. He travels the world for his passion of exploring new places and capturing them through his lens.