

How Death Turned My Hand, Eyes & Heart Towards The 'Third World'



The author, front centre, on a day out with female pupils

The loss of a father for many will often spark not just fury, anger and loss, but invite a calling. And that is what happened to me. Not immediately, but slowly. Drip by drip. Made all the more shocking and frightening as this calling meant I chose to embark

on a journey of examining international development at grass roots, all on a shoe string budget. Alone. With no previous professional or academic experience. The how, where and who of it all, I hope to share with you not just in my memoirs but also in this series of exclusive blog posts for LSE Sociology.

In 2004, when news came of my father having been hit by a truck on his way to morning prayers in Bangladesh, I recall feeling dazed and robot-like. Yet after news of this abrupt accident, I flew out. Within 24 hours I landed in Osmani Airport, 15 minutes drive from my family home in Sylhet City. However, I soon realised I had been lied to by my family members. Weeping, wailing, screaming women engulfed me. Men wore white. Women were beating their chests. The father they told me I could expect to visit in hospital, for whom I was clutching my Muslim rosary beads and fervently praying for was in fact lying in front of me. Dead. Inside an open wooden coffin, eyes closed on his cold calm face within a white linen shroud frosted with melting ice on a hot day. Gone from me forever. Swallowed.

I guess they thought I was too delicate as a woman to bear the shock of death. My anger and grief turned inside out to annihilate my entire positive thought processes for Islam and Bangladesh. I flew back to UK within 24 hours and pondered. I then chose to cut ties with his beloved country, which I angrily accused of stealing and deleting him from my life. You see my father was my rock. The best man I ever met. I never wanted anything to do with Bangladesh again.

Now that he was gone, I started to reflect on my father's pleading calls to me throughout my City career to help him fly the banner of true Islam and to set up a charity – all of which fell deaf on my Westernised ears. You see I was busy having *my* life and *my* career. I had no desire to ever connect or have anything to do with Bangladesh. Attracted by the big city lights of London and fast corporate life, by the time I hit my late 20s, I ran away from all he had taught me; including him.

After a few years had passed, I had found myself mellowing. So I flew out again to Bangladesh in 2009, and through the search to find my beloved father, rediscovered his story, his legacy, the weeping rural villagers who to this day cry over his loss and cling to me, "Yasmin you are ours, we walk with you, don't leave us the way your father did". How could I not listen?

You see grief is a funny thing. It makes you do random acts. It stays with you like an intimate stranger. Whispering, goading, mocking. As a belated gift, I slowly and painstakingly began to unearth my father's incomplete charitable work out in Bangladesh and then chose to resurrect it alone. Since 2012, I have been attempting to use my business know-how, network of contacts, and new ideas to deliver his dreams of monumentally lifting rural and poverty stricken folks out of their dire situation.

Fast forward. Here I am, in 2016. Utterly rooted with my feet, head and heart in London. Yet also stretching my arms feverishly to reach the many I have sleepless nights over; those I care about out in Bangladesh. Simple, hard working families who are toiling day and night. Everyday grassroots mothers, fathers, artisans, orphans, street-kids I have been meeting since 2012, who I am



Yasmin with child weavers

passionately inspired to try and help. Whose honest, unedited stories and visions and dreams we, as developed nations in the Western hemisphere, never hear from.

Through this series of blog posts for LSE Sociology, I hope to bring the dilemmas and dreams of the rural village men and women desperate to climb out of poverty. Of the rickshaw man, who looks young but is an old man in his head, caring and feeding for his entire family alone – whom I promised to help but who is now lost to me as all I had was his mobile phone number. Of the plans I have to empower the hundreds of hijab clad girls at the school my father funded via skills, training and education. And of orphan children like the young bright lad I met a few years back, who I continue to cry about because two years on I cannot seem to find a solution to educate him, as his nearest kin have no space for him in their house.



Yasmin with pupils at Gaas Bari Madrasa, a rural girls school she supports

I observe with calm anger the dreadful statistics of global poverty and how millennium goal after millennium goal continue to be set. Yet as the Bangladeshi folks wisely remark, “let them have their goals Miss, we just need food, health, clean

water and hope and the only way we get this is to believe in Allah – as after all who else is there for us poor people?”

For me inequality simply exists because wealth generation is limited to the few, and often women, especially those who become mothers, remain financially subjugated and controlled everywhere at the mercy of a patriarchal society – be it in the UK or Bangladesh. So in this series of posts I hope to share the experiences of my mission as a campaigner and activist to ensure the independent economic well-being of every woman; and then of every man. How I plan to change the horrific statistic that keeps me awake at nights: that only 1 per cent of the world's property and deeds are owned by women.

Before I go, a parting thought. Good sociology to me means being the change we want to see. But before we blame society I remind myself we are society. And to make this a better place, we must change ourselves. I first had to do that. It's not easy. It comes with serious consequences and challenges. By sharing it all with you here on these blog posts, I hope at the very least to spark debate, provide insight and cultivate interest in this crazy, loveable, thrilling new world I now occupy. And to give those connected to the LSE a chance to listen to a new voice and new ideas for massive societal change that one day could change the fortunes of almost 900 million people across the 'Third World.'

Biography

Yasmin Choudhury is a campaigner and British social entrepreneur passionate about delivering new poverty solutions to the developing world. In 2012, she started **Lovedesh** and the **Amcariza Foundation** under which she has been working alone, out in the field in Bangladesh, to test and introduce her ideas for a new social economic model for poverty alleviation. Her strategic mission is to change how the rest of the world experience and buy from 'Third World' nations.

In January 2016, Yasmin was nominated as a finalist in the entrepreneur of the year category for the annual national British Muslim awards in recognition for her work in developing world. She has written for *The Independent* as well as featuring in interviews by the BBC, *The Guardian*, and global German broadcaster *Deutsche Welle*.

Yasmin will be writing a series of regular posts that references much of her grassroots international development fieldwork. She will be sharing personal stories of the local folks and characters she is now deeply connected to in Bangladesh.

You can tweet her [@yasminisyasmin](#) or to find out more about her work and projects visit her [website](#).



Yasmin and her father

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