



PHOTOGRAPH BY HARRIET LOGAN

A semi-detached life

AHMODA Khatun has spent her life travelling thousands of miles between one family in Bangladesh and another in Britain.

Now 74, she lives with her daughter, granddaughters and great-grandsons, crammed into a three-bedroomed, semi-detached house in Newton, on the outskirts of Chester, which has a Bangladeshi community more than 1,000 strong.

Swathed in white cloth with her hands clasped, as she sits on the edge of a velvet sofa in a front room which doubles as a bedroom, Ahmoda speaks through an interpreter, surrounded by the 12 relatives who live with her: 'I have one daughter here and another in Bangladesh. I don't forget either side, but constantly feel torn between the two.'

'It is part of our religion to help each other, and there remains a very strong feeling among us for the

CONCERN
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Bibi Jan Bibi, aged 105, arrived in Britain one year ago from a small village in Bangladesh. She now lives in a quiet suburb of Chester, but says that she misses her own country 7,000 miles away. Tanya Reed reports on the links to those back home

motherland. But in Bangladesh people are closer. I find it strange that in Britain people don't know their neighbours.'

When Ahmoda flies to Bangladesh she takes cosmetics, pens and clothes — in some instances, gifts that cost more than her airfare.

Many wealthy Westernised Bangladeshis see it as their duty to fly their relatives to Britain — sometimes several times a year — regardless of the steep price of air fares. And then there are times when relatives travel in the other direction.

Until a year ago, Bibi Jan Bibi, the family's great-grandmother on the paternal side, was living in her own brick-built house in the

Bangladeshi village of Dilara Begum. Now, at 105 years of age, she has replaced Ahmoda as the matriarchal figure at the centre of the household.

She reminisces about the days she spent helping her late husband look after their land, days when women worked on their own farms getting in the rice crop. In those days, her house was made of mud.

'I miss Bangladesh and want to go back to visit my son's daughters who lived with me in my house,' she says. 'When I'm there, I stay active; I'm more healthy and I go for walks. Here in Britain, it's often too cold to go out.'

She admits that being torn between two countries has become a way of life. 'When I lived in

Bangladesh, I missed my family in Britain. Now I find it's the other way around. We all feel so divided at some time.'

Safia, 18, British-born granddaughter of both Bibi and Ahmoda, feels that people born in Britain cannot share their parents' nostalgia about Bangladesh — even though many youngsters choose to holiday there each year.

'I've been over twice, and at first it felt like home, as if I belonged there. Yet for all the love from my relatives, all the letters I've since received asking me to go back, I couldn't settle there. Feelings fade away when you are born somewhere else.'

Her family's main source of income, like that of many other

Bangladeshi families, is the catering industry. Her father, Abdul Hashim, owns a restaurant in Chester and is dedicated to the welfare of communities in Bangladesh.

In 1973, he founded a primary school in Greater Syhlet, within the Habigj district, fulfilling his own father's wish that all children in the area receive a primary education. He continued to pay teacher's fees until last year, when a government grant was secured.

Shamsuddin Ahmed, who owns eight restaurants and arrived in Britain in 1958, is another example of the strength of feeling about Bangladesh. He set up Chester's Bangladeshi and Asian Community Development Project 10 years ago and will be working with local schools keen to adopt projects in Bangladesh.

He has distributed suitcases-full of spectacles, and last December helped instal 42 water pumps in Greater Syhlet, where he grew up. He returns there every few years, if possible.

'Right from when I first came to Britain, I felt empty if I wasn't help-