Meet the Bhikoo-Patels: Proud Kiwi Muslims for more than a century

Brittany Keogh Sunday Star Times

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Abdulhak Bhikoo, reads an article about the New Zealand Muslim Association with his son-in-law Firoz Patel and grandson Muhammed Patel. Six generations of the Bhikoo-Patel family have called New Zealand home. Photo: CHRIS MCKEEN / STUFF

A Muslim family who has called New Zealand home for more than a century hopes the devastating terrorist attack on two Christchurch mosques will motivate others to learn more about each others' faiths and cultures.

Three generations of the Bhikoo-Patel family - descendants of Ismail Ahmed Bhikoo, a pioneer in Auckland's Muslim community - shared mugs of chai tea with *Stuff* in the week after mass shootings at Masjid Al Noor and Linwood Masjid, that killed 50 worshippers.

At the Grey Lynn home of Bhikoo's grandson, Abdulhak Bhikoo, 83, they described how Bhikoo's grandfather arrived in New Zealand from the Indian state of Gujarat about 1908, almost by accident.

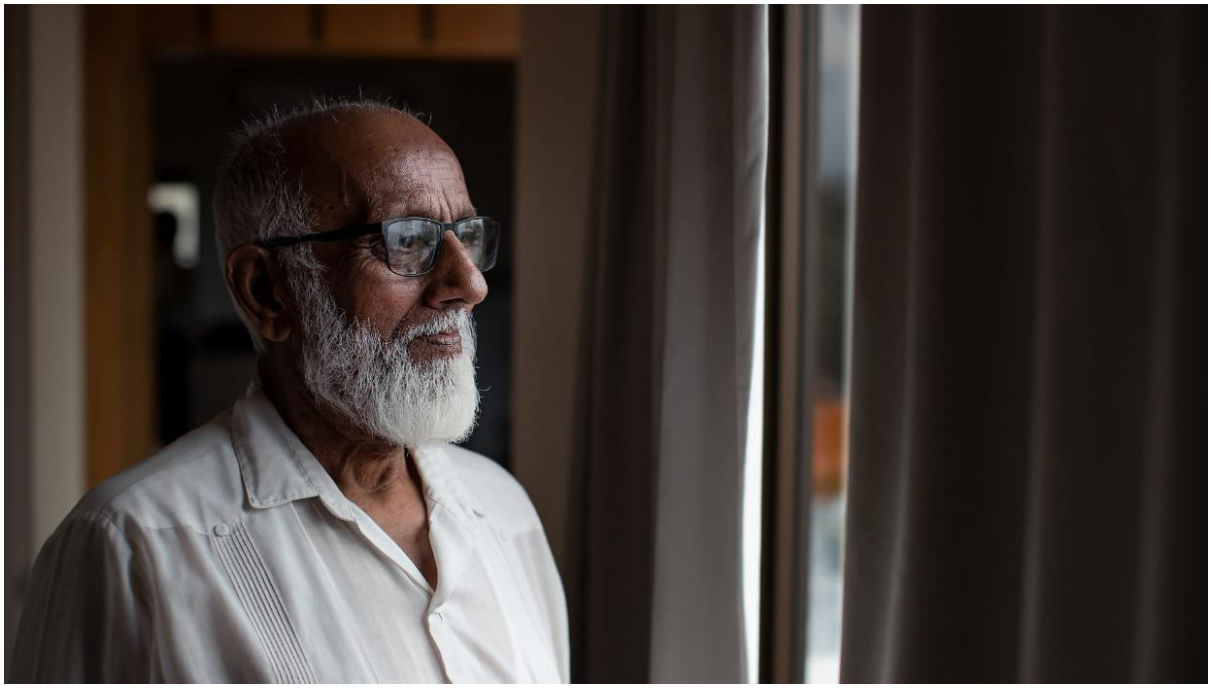
Ismail Ahmed Bhikoo arrived in New Zealand from the Indian state of Gujarat in about 1908. He is believed to have been the first Indian Muslim to settle in Auckland. Five generations of his descendants have called the city home. Photo: SUPPLIED / Sunday-Star-Times

Ismail Bhikoo had been on a P&O ship heading to Fiji, but during an Auckland stopover he marvelled at the city's landscape and asked the immigration officer if he could disembark there instead. Because he spoke some English, his request was granted.

His wife stayed in India and Bhikoo returned regularly to visit her. On later trips, Bhikoo's children Yusuf Ebrahim, Sulaiman, Hassam and Abdul Samad moved to New Zealand to live with him.

Today, more than 150 of Ismail Ahmed Bhikoo's descendants are Kiwis.

Because of the colour of their skin, some people assumed they were immigrants.



Abdulhak Bhikoo, 83, is the grandson of Ismail Ahmed Bhikoo, who came to New Zealand in 1908. Photo: CHRIS MCKEEN / STUFF

Despite being born and raised in Auckland and having a New Zealand accent, Ismail Ahmed Bhikoo's great-great-grandson Yusef Patel, 29, has been asked by a teacher where he came from. When he replied "Herne Bay", he was asked again, "No, where are you really from?"

His twin brother Muhammed Patel has had similar experiences: "When people [tell] me 'oh you're Indian', I say 'No, I'm Kiwi. I was born here. I'm a New Zealander'."

The young men say their childhood was similar to any other Kiwi: spending time with grandparents and watching sport.

Muhammed Patel, 29, is a civil engineer. He was born in NZ and is a second-generation Kiwi-Indian Muslim. Photo: CHRIS MCKEEN / STUFF

Muhammed and Yusef's father, Firoz Patel, is the mosque's secretary. He said several school groups visited the mosque in recent months to learn about the Muslim faith.

The mosque was not trying to convert people, but build awareness.

"It's an education thing, respecting other religions," Firoz said.

Muhammed said Muslims needed to learn about other religions too: "It's a full circle as well. It's not just a one-way dialogue."

A member of the King Cobra gang pays his respects to Al-Masjid Al-Jamie secretary Firoz Pate the day after two Christchurch mosques were subject to a terror attack, killing 50 worshippers. Photo: CHRIS MCKEEN / STUFF

After the terrorist attack on March 15, the mosque had been inundated with flowers and supportive messages.

The Catholic church across the road, Sacred Heart Parish, held a memorial service for the victims on March 17, during which leaders from both faiths spoke and prayed together.

Yusef said the show of solidarity and kindness from the community had been amazing.

"There's so much love going on."

More from
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