

Link: [Soundcloud Playlist - Iran Yusuf Interview 4 Sep 2025](#)

1:08:31 – 1:31:12 (interview conducted by Imam Jalees Khan)

Again, I have a real pleasure of interviewing our dear brother Irfan Yusuf. Brother Irfan Yusuf is a British Pakistani Deaf Muslim. He trained in law in Leeds, Birmingham and London. He is currently studying for a PhD specialising in Islamic Jurisprudence at the University of Leeds. Brother Yusuf is internationally recognised as a Deaf Muslim academic scholar and is a prominent member of both Deaf and Deaf Muslim communities and regularly represents their interests both nationally and internationally. Again, a real pleasure of having brother Irfan Yusuf on our show.

I would like to mention brother Irfan's interview was done through sign language so that the voice you are hearing or that you will hear is of the translator not Irfan Yusuf but everything that the translator does say is from brother Irfan Yusuf through sign language.

Right, let's get straight into this. From your experience, how has society involved or evolved in its understanding of and inclusivity towards the deaf community?

Yes, before I answer your question, I just think it's important to establish a big picture of who we are here and what we do. So as a board of trustees for the British Deaf Association, it's important for us to understand our role and what our role is to represent the deaf community.

As a board, we're working towards BDA's vision and mission. We are a member-led organisation and they have told us they want to see sign language thrive. Because as a language, it's been oppressed since 1880.

I will come back to that point later. So I just wanted to give some context there. So BDA is a deaf-led organisation.

We are an inclusive and representative organisation of deaf signers. We have lived experience of being deaf signers ourselves, so we know what it's like. We know what the barriers are out there.

We've experienced them ourselves. It also means we know what works for us and what doesn't work for us. So let me give you an example to illustrate my point.

Think about going to the GP. For deaf people, there are many communication issues and struggles when going to a GP, which is very stressful and it means we don't have full access. We have to think about how we communicate with the doctors.

So in the current setup, commissioners will develop interpreting provision for GPs, NHS, et cetera, but that might only operate between the hours of nine till five. So what about before and after those hours? What do we do then? Commissioners think they know what works

for deaf people, but in reality, they don't always know. It's us, British Deaf Association, our board of trustees and our members, we have the experience.

We know how to design services for deaf people so that they work for them and that's why it's important for us to encourage deaf leadership in the design and delivery of services so that services meet our needs. So back to your question after the context. How have attitudes changed in society? I think the deaf community itself has evolved a lot since 1880.

So BDA was founded in 1890. 135 years ago and it's important to give you a bit of background information to help you understand what happened in 1880. There was an event called the Milan Conference in 1880, which bans the use of sign language, which was a big violation of human rights as part of deaf history.

That's why BDA was founded 10 years later. Before 1880, sign language was thriving across Britain and the deaf community and then when the Milan Conference banned the use of sign language, things changed. The main aim of that conference was to focus on an auditory approach for deaf children in education, not to use sign language.

They believed that hearing and speaking was better, more important than learning sign language. So everybody was advised to not use sign language any further. But the BDA, the British Deaf Association, we know that's not right.

Okay, so we know that's not true because over the last 20 years, deaf scholars and deaf researchers have found evidence that there are huge benefits for deaf children learning sign language alongside speech and children who have both sign language and spoken language can attain on a par with their hearing peers. Most deaf children are born into hearing families. It's also important that they are offered provision to learn sign language.

Talking about recent changes in our society, if I think about the media, there are two famous deaf actors. We have Rose Ayling-Ellis and Matthew Gurney. They've both been involved in media productions of late, which has helped to shift the attitudes and perceptions of the mainstream audience to deaf people and sign language.

We also recently were awarded the BSL Act 2022, and there was the BSL Act in Scotland back in 2015. And because the law is changing a lot in British society, all departments in government, such as education, health, etc., are also evolving as well, and I do feel that awareness is improving as a result. It seems that there is more and more acceptance of BSL in our communities, in our societies.

And, you know, I really feel that nowadays everybody just loves sign language. I hope that answered your question, okay?

Yes, definitely, most definitely. Thank you so much for such an elaborate answer. Thank you so much.

If you go to the next question, as a trustee of the BDA, what more can the organisation do to raise awareness and promote education about deafness, particularly in schools, but also in other educational settings?

We've done a lot. I have to start by saying that we've done a lot, to be honest. We do work hard towards our vision and mission. Our current aim is to achieve sign language in education.

So, for an example, the BSL GCSE, that's a very important element of our education policy. I have another example. We want to encourage sign language in education, because a recent example that we've seen in Canada.

Now, in Canada, the system will provide free sign language to children and families when the child is identified as being deaf. It doesn't matter if they have a cochlear implant or not. If they are deaf, they will be offered and provided free sign language classes for all the family.

And the evidence from that shows that their mental wellbeing has improved and their educational attainment has also improved, which in turn has improved their career prospects. It's also helped with family stability and also helped to educate professionals in Canadian society. And that shows how important sign language is in education.

Now, having said that, if you look at the UK, GCSE results for roughly the last seven years, actually for seven years in a row, has shown that deaf children attain lower results compared to their hearing peers consistently. So, it shows the situation is getting worse in terms of deaf education and for deaf people. The University of Manchester SORD team, they did a survey back in 2023.

They interviewed youths from years 10 to year 13, 14, ages 14 to 19. And they did surveys with two groups of youths, one group of hearing children and a second group of deaf children, all of the same ages. And there are about 130 children in each group.

The deaf children who were surveyed had cochlear implants, but no access to sign language. And the results from the survey show that for the deaf group, their mental wellbeing was a lot worse and their attainment levels were worse as well. The statistics show that their mental illness was five times more likely to occur in the deaf group than in the hearing group.

And that gives us the evidence we need to show that we need the public services to understand that British Sign Language is a good thing. Lots of homes have bilingual homes, maybe spoken English and spoken foreign language. Why can't bilingualism be spoken English and British Sign Language as well? In my personal experience, I see Asian and Black communities sometimes have negative attitudes or perhaps stigma towards deafness and sign language.

We want to change that. We want to offer a positive perception and attitude. We want to show them how important it is, how good it is for children to have access to sign language in both the home and at school.

My own experience is that I see many Muslim communities see sign languages, sign language as a negative thing in the past. But I do see that now attitudes are changing in the Muslim community. And I think that's because of the work BDA does for the community.

I think it's because of what we see in the media. I think it's because of the changes in the law that I mentioned. And in terms of education, our number one goal is to achieve the BSL GCSE and to provide bilingualism in education right from the early years throughout the education system.

If the British government use the same model as I articulated from Canada, providing free sign language for families with deaf children, we know that there will be a good economic return on that investment. We know that for every pound spent on this, the government would receive four pounds back. So it's important now to remove the oppression from sign language, allow it to flourish.

And in turn, that will also contribute to the economy.

Amazing stuff. Yeah, absolutely. What challenges have you encountered and what positive experiences stand out?

So as a deaf Muslim, I'm British Pakistani myself. My experience in school and in the community, I've actually been very different experiences. In school, I experienced language oppression.

I didn't learn English until I was 14. I didn't learn to sign properly until I was about 11 or 12. My education was more based on the total communication approach, which is not sign language.

So I didn't have enough in my education. Now, government policy thinks that mainstream education works for deaf children, but that's not always the case. Myself, yes, I'm deaf.

I have other deaf friends and family. Each deaf person is an individual. They will have different levels of speech, hearing, abilities to lip read.

There's not a one size fits all approach that can be adapted. We all have different needs. One solution is sometimes deemed to be the provision of CSWs, communication support workers.

That didn't work for me. So I say overall, my experience wasn't that good in education. I think if I was born today, things would be a lot better because we now have the BSL Act.

We have more services that are accessible in sign language, but Allah knows best what's best for me. And you know I am following that. My experience in the Muslim community as a youngster was quite tough.

Sign language wasn't allowed in the Muslim community. I was made to feel ashamed, and it was a taboo to use sign language. But things have changed a lot in that community now too.

There is definitely more acceptance. There are more positive attitudes out there. So my personal experience, I think has sort of evolved from more from negative towards more positive experiences now, but I do feel there is a long way to go. Inshallah.

Amazing stuff. It was just a quick question for brother Irfan. Where did you, where did you grow up?

I was born and raised in Leeds.

Leeds okay. Amazing. Amazing stuff. Yeah.

If you go towards our final question, as an eminent scholar, how do you feel different ethnic communities have embraced disability? What positive changes have you observed and what challenges still remain?

In the past, in the past, I would say the attitudes and perceptions of ethnic communities to deaf people were quite negative. But now I think things have changed a lot. And I think there are two reasons for that.

Firstly, we at the British Deaf Association, the BDA, we have a group called the EDI group, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy Group, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy Group. And that's led by another of our trustees called Ahmed Madawi. He is a trustee of the board.

And he's trying to find a way to think about how BDA can work together with ethnic groups and how they can work with us moving forwards. And I think the second reason is there are lots of deaf organisations out there. So, for example, Deaf Muslim UK, Black Deaf UK, the Jewish Deaf Association and Deaf Rainbow, many groups such as those who are really starting to recognise and understand the needs of deaf people with different identities and how that relates to sign language.

As a board at the BDA, we recognise that people have a lot of intersectionalities. We're deaf, we're sign language users, but we have other intersectionalities that are part of our being as well. So we need to work together.

And I do see a lot of positive steps in today's society. I do see more people working together to improve things, but I do feel we still have a long way to go. I would like to see more awareness and understanding of each of the groups.

Whether we're talking about Black issues, Muslim issues, Jewish issues, I would like to see more working together to move forward and understand each other. And BDA is absolutely working on that. Amazing stuff.

Thank you so much for your time, yourself as the interpreter and obviously brother Irfan as well for taking out his time. So thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

I know the audience will benefit immensely. I really enjoyed listening to you and obviously talking to you as well. It's been absolutely amazing.

But hopefully we can do justice to this topic as well and obviously keep us in your prayers as well. And then hopefully we can obviously do justice. Inshallah.

InshaAllah.

Amazing, amazing stuff. Thank you so much for your time. Thank you.

And have a lovely rest of your day. And thank you for giving us the opportunity to be with you here today. We really appreciate it.

Thank you so much. Assalamualaikum.

Absolute amazing stuff by brother Irfan Yusuf. I really enjoyed talking to him and listening to him or talking to him in general. And I would also like to thank the translators for both these interviews as well as Rubbena Sister Rubbena as well and by the Grace of Allah they did absolute amazing stuff with the interviews, and I do have to point that out.