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Locating Muslim Diasporas:

Multi-Locality, Multi-Disciplinarity and Performativity

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Abstract:

The *Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration* produces one of our most detailed anatomies of a "TranslAsian" time-space location. It juxtaposes the ways that multiple migrations and diasporas have been locally, multi-locally and trans-temporally configured, and so re-orientates attention beyond a Eurocentric focus on the West. In an ambitious move towards multi-disciplinary holism that reflexively acknowledges the "pieced-together" nature of its own representations "here and now" social relations and juxtaposed with thicker descriptions of memorialized "origins and causes". In this regard The Bengal Diaspora can be said to map "religion"-based dimensions of Muslim diasporas in terms of three distinctive spatial scales. However, while "Muslim" identifications are rightly conceived as contextual performances by migrants with divergent social capitals in specific social settings, I suggest that the unstable reproduction of Islamic tradition as a more or less enduring part of social structure is a part of Muslim performativity too.

Keywords:

Diasporas, Multi-locality, Ethnicity, Muslims, Performativity, Tradition

The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration (Alexander et al 2016) explores for the first time a diverse set of population movements, social relations and imagined communities that connect several quite different but interrelated locations across India, Bangladesh, Britain and beyond. My first set of comments about this excellent new book reflect research that I completed while leading an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) 'Diasporas, Migration and Identities' (DMI) programme (2005-10) network comparing five postcolonial 'British Asian' cities. So, while *The Bengal Diaspora* very clearly re-states the constraining power of the state and national borders in the face of overly-optimistic theories of transnationalism, based on a perspective developed in *Writing the City in British Asian Diasporas*, I suggest that Alexander et al (2016) present a devolved and implicitly comparative analysis that is attentive to both the particularities of the local and regional configuration of power and space, as well as its 'multi-local' connectedness to people, places and temporalities elsewhere and elsewhen (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1993; Vertovec 2000: 147; Cohen 2008: 124; cf. Knott 2005). The scale on which such an analysis is taken forward in *The Bengal Diaspora* is most impressive. Encompassing multiple empirical studies contrasting locations from big city Dhaka, Calcutta and London to various villages and camps, it represents a significant step-change in the literature. Enabled by an AHRC DMI large grant, this co-authored volume produces one of our most in-depth anatomies of what earlier and more speculative theorising envisaged as a 'TranslAsian' (Kaur and Kalra 1996: 223) time-space location.

The amount of research now published on Bengali London makes giving an original account of this particular story of migration and settlement quite a challenge. However, from the more glocally comparative perspective presented here, the iconic Sylheti diaspora in Tower Hamlets is radically re-positioned as the 'international' outlier when compared to much larger and more catastrophic, yet hitherto overlooked, 'internal' Muslim migrations within South Asia. The partition of India at independence in 1947, which led to the creation of (East and West) Pakistan, and the 1971 civil war, which led to the creation of Bangladesh, saw many millions of Muslims compelled (or feel compelled) to move longer and shorter distances, temporarily and permanently, both across borders and within towns and cities. While fascinating historical contextualisation also demonstrates that Bengal had long since been an "intense zone of internal mobility" (2016: 27) shaped by capitalism and the state, Alexander et al highlight social divisions associated with migrants' differential 'mobility capital' – land, money, education, general know-how and health – to explain an apparent paradox (2016: 74). International migration to the most far-flung destination of the West was undertaken not by those with most capital overall but by young men who, despite having limited finances, literacy and so on, did have access to a centuries' old sea-faring network which came over time to operate like a Sylheti 'closed-shop'. Comparing two different locations of Sylheti settlement in the UK, *The Bengal Diaspora* insightfully contrasts the increasingly visible and confident Bangladeshi presence in the global city of London, with the more marginal, de-industrialised, former mill town of Oldham in the North of England. However, it is the 'scaling up' of such local distinctions across profoundly different Bengali diasporas that really sharpens the analysis, successfully re-orientating attention beyond a Eurocentric focus on postcolonial migrations to the West.

The originality and the significance of *The Bengal Diaspora* resides very much too in its multi-disciplinary collaborations. This leads me to my second set of comments, which again reflect ideas developed in *Writing the City in British Asian Diasporas*, a volume concerned with discrepant representations of spaces in different genres of writing (McLoughlin 2014a; 2014b). In the juxtaposition and interplay of different scholarly approaches, the text of *The Bengal Diaspora* begins to highlight a more complex, if still necessarily incomplete, analysis of social reality. Encompassing the shared yet distinctive humanistic perspectives and sensibilities of history, sociology and anthropology, *The Bengal Diaspora* seeks to illuminate both a bird's eye view of the constraining power of history and social structure, as well as a worm's [!] eye view (2016: 8) of the exercise of human agency among marginalised constituencies. Moreover, in a refreshingly reflexive move, the three co-authors openly acknowledge that writing up an "ambitious, sprawling, idiosyncratic project" (2016: Acknowledgements) on such a "huge" scale could never have produced a "seamless" text. Indeed, *The Bengal Diaspora* does not 'feel' like a single-authored monograph and Alexander et al. do not seek to "flatten out" (2016: 11) their individual and disciplinary research inclinations. Rather they bring these into a dialogue (or trialogue) where no one scholarly voice or perspective has had the last word. Nevertheless, in laying bare the fact that the material on India and Bangladesh is more historical and anthropological, while in the UK it is more sociological, the study does inevitably follow an established division of intellectual labour across the global south and global north. Overall, though, the multi-disciplinarity of *The Bengal Diaspora* represents an ambitious move towards a more holistic analysis that nevertheless acknowledges the discordant and 'pieced-together' nature of its own textual representations (McLoughlin 2014a: 2; cf Clifford and Marcus 1986: 7).

Indeed, despite the "fresh dialogue" (2016: 245) opened up by this collaboration, the co-authors conclude that "if anything the disciplines have grown further apart" (2016: 246); they have "misunderstood and talked past each other" (2016: 247). Here Alexander et al. are referring especially to history and sociology, as history's concerns with "origins and causes" contrast with sociology's 'presentist' focus on the "here and now" (2016: 246-7). However, there is a passing recognition too that hostility to questions of "origins" in sociology emerged in strong opposition to seemingly 'bounded' and 'static' conceptions of 'ethnicity' in anthropology (cf CCCS 1982; Benson 1996). In the spirit of the disciplines better understanding - and not talking past - each other, and having re-read some of the key texts myself in recent years (McLoughlin 2014b), I would suggest that while highlighting the problem of 'an over-ethnicised sociology' (Carter and Fenton 2009), some critiques of anthropology's contribution were arguably too selective and polemical. Thus, as its study of the memorialisation of homeland traditions inevitably returns *The Bengal Diaspora* to questions about the symbolic re-organisation, re-invention and fetishisation of culture, it is clear that the volume still shares some frameworks in common with the best of the ethnicity literature, even as conceptualisations of diaspora have often come to displace it (cf Cohen 1974; Werbner and Anwar 1991; Cohen 2008). At the same time, the work carries forward a surprisingly wide range of scholarly engagements that contribute, for instance, to the cross-fertilisation of diaspora and global networks studies and the history and anthropology of Islam in South Asia and the wider Islamicate world (cf. Eaton 1993; Werbner and Basu 1996; McLoughlin 2010; Green 2011). What following Brah (1996: 179-80), I have called a metaphorical Islamic 'homing desire' (McLoughlin 2010: 225) is evidently salient as a

stabilising and universalising narrative of mythic origins, journeying and becoming local for many ordinary migrants. As other chains of memory fracture, they still connect their everyday existence multi-locally to places such as Ajmer, Lucknow, Afghanistan, Persia and Makkah/Madinah (McLoughlin 2009b). Perhaps especially in terms of connecting such work to the study of Muslim diasporas in the West, *The Bengal Diaspora* could be a resource too for the, as yet, fairly limited explorations across the sociology of race and ethnicity, the sociology of religion and a more emergent sociology of Islam (cf. Meer 2008; Bender et al 2012; Turner 2013; Salvatore 2016).

My reflections here point towards a third and final set of comments on *The Bengal Diaspora*. These are again informed by my own work during the last decade, most especially in terms of trying to better understand the relationships between the "Islamic discursive tradition and contextual improvisations by Muslims with divergent cultural capitals living under conditions of specific social relations" (McLoughlin 2007: 88; 2010; 2013b). Given its sub-title, at least one of the concerns of *The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration* is to unsettle simplistic, homogenising or romanticised treatments of such relationships. With attention to how the category 'Muslim' is "created in specific historical contexts" (2016: 3-4; cf Brah 1996: 179), the volume is clear that to a greater or lesser extent all migrants' local experiences were structured by profound poverty, precarious citizenship, various forms of othering and violence at one time or another. Moreover, in terms of key processes associated with 'ethnic relations' or what Brah (1996: 192) has re-styled "diaspora space", even with ethno-national-racial-religious 'un-mixing' and exclusion having been polarised and entrenched for decades, *The Bengal Diaspora* always demonstrates that the

formation of 'groups', boundaries and identifications remains dynamically, contingently and relationally constructed (cf. Cohen 1974; Hall 1991: 52-3, 58). My specific comment here is that together with the rich material on symbolic rituals, material culture and the memorialisation of homeland, this work on the processes of inclusion and exclusion associated with making new homes abroad can be seen as mapping three distinctive yet sometimes overlapping spatial locations and scales: i) in some contexts Muslimness is indigenized and principally reinforces *local* ethno-national and diasporic entanglements with people, place, language, custom, ancestry and so on; ii) in others it may also enable *trans-and multi-local* or transnational linkages, extending ethno-national or diasporic associations or, as is increasingly the case in South Asia and Britain, trump these with a multi-ethnic Islamic universalism; iii) however, crucially, Islam is also a symbolic resource which can inspire more amorphous, liminal *supra-local*, utopian or absolute imaginings that temporarily transcend everyday lived space (cf. McLoughlin 2013a: 134-6; McLoughlin and Zavos 2014; cf. Tweed 1997; 2006; Baumann 1999; Vásquez 2011).

In *The Bengal Diaspora*, then, Muslimness is never just one thing and always emergent (or not) at the intersection of social structures and positioned human agency and capacities (cf. McLoughlin 2007: 288; McLoughlin 2013b: 36). In a discussion about changing gender relations and marriage practices in Bengal and Britain the co-authors rightly reassert that explanations of social reality invoking "culture and normative tradition" (2016: 143) should be treated with caution, highlighting instead "the complex intersection between external constraints, tradition, cultural change and individual choice" (2016: 153). Though not a work primarily dedicated to theory, Alexander et al do cumulatively explore such matters further

in the suggestion that [Muslimness] "cannot be understood as ageless tradition replayed again and again in the same ways … but [rather] as constantly changing performances grounded in particular places" (2016: 185). It is clear that unlike much of the sociological literature on Muslim diasporas, which has tended to focus on relations between 'official' Muslim organisations and public recognition and regulation by the state, *The Bengal Diaspora* prioritises ordinary migrants' demotic (embodied, material, affective) improvisations of tradition (McLoughlin and Zavos 2014; cf. Jeldtoft and Nielsen 2011). However, it may be that there is more to say about tradition here. In particular, I would be interested to explore further the significance of a concluding remark that performances are "not autonomous: they are rooted in particular versions of groups' histories" (2016: 247). Given that the volume foregrounds the shaping power of history in various helpful ways, what might be lost and gained in theorising 'Islam' as a socio-historical tradition or cultural resource that is an enduring if inevitably unstable part of 'external' structures that are re-produced (as well as contested) through Muslim performativity (cf. Butler 1997; Mahmood 2005; cf. McLoughlin 2015)?

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