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"Writing British Asian cities"

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Abstract:

This article reports in brief on an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Diasporas, Migrations and Identities (DMI) programme funded network, 'Writing British-Asian Cities', which ran between 2006 and 2009. It contends that the diverse local configuration of Asian Britain has to a large extent remained unexamined in the literature. Having organised community-based events in five English cities, an indication is given of how London's East End, Bradford, Manchester, Birmingham and Leicester have all been 'written' and represented across a variety of genres since the 1960s. Bringing the perspectives of the social sciences into conversation with the arts and humanities, the network also prioritised further reflection on certain disciplinary perspectives and crosscutting themes: history; literary/cultural production; religion; gender. Various working papers and other resources which report in more detail on the project are lodged on an interactive website, while a research group of the British Association of South Asian Studies (BASAS) has also been recently established.

Keywords:

British-Asians; diasporas; locality; writing; representation

Introduction:

Since the 1960s the study of racialised and ethnicised 'communities' in specific towns and cities has been a key feature of social-scientific accounts of South Asians in Britain. However, attention to locality, place and space was subordinate to analytical paradigms driven by race and class in Sociology and urban ethnicity in Anthropology. Ballard's (1994) well-known ethnographic collection, for example, is framed in terms of ethno-religious groups and their regional contexts of migration, whether in the Panjab, Kashmir, Gujarat, Sylhet or East Africa. However, despite also highlighting fieldwork in a variety of UK locations, the re-construction of homeland traditions in diaspora is often contextualised at a national scale, with the local character of multiply configured British-Asian locations being of only passing concern. In a volume seeking to shift attention away from ethnic groups and their homeland roots to the politics of cultural production, Kaur and Kalra (1996, 223) hint at the significance of locales for the 'Br-Asian' vernaculars emerging as part of 'Transl-Asian'

multi-directional flows between the subcontinent and its diaspora (cf. Vertovec 2000). However, while Handsworth and Southall receive a mention alongside California, Toronto and Jallandhar, a fuller excavation of such Br-Asian localities would have to wait until the appearance a decade later of another key text shaped by postcolonial and cultural studies scholarship. Although the result is inevitably uneven given a desire to disrupt neat Orientalising classification, Ali et al. (2006) do reflect in different ways upon the diversity of 'BrAsian' locales in England's main conurbations around the capital, the Midlands and the North. In short portrait pieces on Newham (Rai), Southall and Wembley (Huq) in London's inner-city and suburbs, as well as Manchester's Curry Mile in Rusholme (Kirmani), and in full length chapters on Leicester (Singh) and Bradford (McLoughlin), the contributors do very different things with their brief. Rehearsals of demography and history sit alongside reflexive autobiography and evocations of street-scapes. The nature of my own reflections (McLoughlin 2006) suggested the idea of a retrospective on representations of the British-Asian city across different genres of writing. All writing, scholarly or otherwise, is inevitably a discursive representation framed by the position of its author and the broader relations of its production, not least in terms of predominant institutional settings, disciplinary tropes and so on (Clifford and Marcus 1986). However, while the overall structure, inequalities and prejudices of a society are inevitably articulated in tropes between and across genres, the representations that emerge are still complex, often ambiguous and potentially counter-hegemonic. Moreover, while as particular snapshots of social reality, all texts reveal endless gaps and silences, in their creative interplay it is also possible to highlight these discrepancies and so provide a more critical and reflexive, complex and contested, if still incomplete, analysis. With a grant of £20,000 from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which is running a programme on Diasporas, Migration and Identity (DMI) 2005–2010, the idea of investigating the writing of British-Asian cities was extended from Bradford to London's East End, Manchester, Leicester and Birmingham. Five meetings of academics and non-academics in community-based spaces set out to examine how each Asian city-space had been 'written' by differently positioned constituencies, both 'insiders' and 'outsiders', since the 1960s. Events were organised around an agreed range of session themes involving quite different genres: academic writing by sociologists, anthropologists and others; local and national government policy, tourism and media coverage; oral history collections and literary/cultural production from novels and poetry to music and dance.

The network and its activities:

The project was managed by myself, as principal investigator, in collaboration with Leeds co-applicants William Gould, Ananya J. Kabir and Emma Tomalin. At the heart of the network was a steering committee of academics and non-academics, which met several times and was responsible for organising the five city events and writing working papers for the interactive website (see below) and final publication.[1] Overall, there were eight regular members who saw the project through to completion: John Eade (Roehampton/Surrey); Shailaja Fennell (Cambridge); Richard Gale (Birmingham); Virinder S. Kalra (Manchester); Aki Nawaz (Nation Records); Irna Qureshi (oral historian and freelance researcher); Pippa Virdee (De

Montfort); John Zavos (Manchester).[2] Thus, as well as conversations across the disciplines of Sociology, Anthropology, Religious Studies, Post-colonial Literature, History, Development Studies and Geography, the steering committee brought academics into sustained conversation with two key stakeholders working across the arts, culture and community sectors. Nawaz and Qureshi contributed to discussions especially in terms of city events, challenging some of the unquestioned priorities of academics and having input into outputs such as the website which includes nonacademics as one of its audiences. Although it was not part of the original proposal, it was eventually decided to hold all the city events outside conventional academic spaces in local restaurants or community centres. The meetings were hosted at Mumtaz Paan House (Bradford, organised by McLoughlin), Kobi Nazrul Centre (Tower Hamlets, organised by Eade), Indus 5 restaurant (Manchester, organised by Kalra and Zavos), Peepul Centre (Leicester, organised by Virdee) and the Nishkam Civic Association (Birmingham, organised by Gale). Such spaces had the advantage of feeling less intimidating for non-academics, although in some locations they still operated their own closures, for example, in terms of gender (see below). However, all also told particular stories about the character of each city and reflected wider network themes, for example, a community centre associated with a Gujarati women's organisation in Leicester and a civic centre associated with a trans-national Sikh religious movement in Birmingham. Either as speakers invited to reflect on their own or others' writing of the city in question, or as participants, 70 non-academics and 48 academics in addition to the steering committee attended the five city events, with numbers for each limited to around 30 to ensure intimacy. Engagement with non-academics was one of the highlights of the project and a very wide range of individuals and organisations were represented including: religious and black and minority ethnic organisations; research foundations and charities; local politicians and local government officials and policy-makers; writers, poets, musicians, arts organisations, newspapers, local historians/archivists, regional publishers. Some conflicting agendas were occasionally in evidence in terms of refused invitations (for example, the local press in Bradford) or appropriate activities (for example, performance of bhangra in a religiously-owned space in Birmingham). However, most non-academics reported feeling validated by the experience, noting that it was unusual for researchers to engage beyond the academy in this way. An informal approach to presentations and – after the first event in Bradford – the absence of tables and the circular arrangement of chairs, all encouraged participation and conversation more than traditional academic meetings. As one-off opportunities for local networking and interchange, the events could not undo the unequal relations between academics and nonacademics, but they did, nevertheless, produce important suggestions for resources such as oral history projects, as well as problematising a focus on writings published in English. Each city now has a dedicated set of pages on an interactive website,[3] which report on discussions at the events, as well as providing links to working papers and other resources useful for researchers, teachers and those with more general interests. The website is interactive to the extent that it is possible to comment on papers and make suggestions for the resource centre, where links to scholarly organisations/research concerned with South Asian Studies can also be found. In addition there is a developing web montage of significant actors from a range of backgrounds speaking about British-Asian Bradford and Manchester. This work was commissioned from steering committee member, Irna Qureshi, and it is hoped that

it can be extended to all five locations through further applications for funding. Presentations from a two-day symposium, organised by the applicants at the University of Leeds, 17–18 March 2008, are also collected together on the website.[4] The symposium was a key space for reflecting on the material identified by the city meetings with a wider group of scholarly peers including other AHRC DMI funded researchers working on South Asian diasporas in the UK.[5] Further academic participation in network activity came in the form of speakers and audiences at panels organised by the team at Leeds for the annual conference of the British Association of South Asian Studies (BASAS, Cambridge, March 2007) and the European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies (ECMSAS, Manchester, July 2008).[6]

Writing five British-Asian cities London's East End From Panjabi Sikh-dominated Southall in the west, to Gujarati Hindu influence in Wembley and its environs, the range of 'Asian Londons' is especially diverse. Once an imperial city and now truly global, the long history of immigration to London is nevertheless rooted near the docks in the working class East End (Eade 2000). Today, nearly one-half of all British-Bangladeshis, who trace their roots mainly to rural Sylhet, are settled in the capital and one-quarter alone live in the borough of Tower Hamlets (see, for example, the oral history and ethnography of Visram 1986; Adams 1987; Gardner 1995). The spatial transformation of Brick Lane into 'Banglatown' has allowed for the easy characterisation of an iconic ethno-national authenticity by the local state, tourism and businessmen alike. However this key space has also been the site of everyday struggles for survival and resistance to racism (see Dhondy's 1978 short story; cf. Eade 1989), as well as recent arguments about Sylheti and non-Sylheti representations of the community in Ali's (2003) eponymous novel. Secular and religious, constructions of identities also compete in the recollections of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF)/Tower Hamlets borough council sponsored Swadhinata oral history project (Eade et al. 2006) and Hussain's (2007) post-Islamist autobiography.[7]

Bradford:

In the 1980s, novelist Hanif Kureishi (1986) ventured north to another British-Asian location, one that the cosmopolitan Londoner-cum-Karachi-ite found both resoundingly provincial and foreign. Essentially the largest of the former woollen (and cotton) mill towns strung out across the Pennines, the 'Worstedopolis' has struggled to reinvent itself in the post-industrial era, having a dual identity as gateway to both the rural Bronte country of the Yorkshire Dales and urban 'Bradistan' (Procter 2003). Large parts of inner-city Bradford such as Manningham are of course dominated by a majority Pakistani and especially Kashmiri heritage Muslim population. As a working-class novel (Mehmood 1983), travelogue (Murphy 1987), ethnography (Dahya 1974; Lewis 1994) and council-sponsored oral history (Bradford Heritage Recording Unit 1994) all show, successful coexistence in the 1960s eventually gave way to unprecedented mobilisation for public recognition during the Bradford 12, Honeyford and Rushdie affairs of the 1980s. Since the mid-1990s, a problem-orientated, policy-led focus on riots, conflict and 'selfsegregation' has preoccupied much writing about this British-Asian

city (Ouseley 2001). Nevertheless, alternative accounts do still emerge, for example in the novels, sociology and oral history of local writer, Alam (2002; Alam and Husband, 2006).[8]

Manchester:

In Werbner's anthropological trilogy (1990; 2002; 2003), the Manchester story is one of Panjabi Muslims from more urban and educated origins in Pakistan, their relative economic success and the co-operation and competition associated with community life, from the 'fun' spaces of popular culture to a transnational Sufi cult. However, whilst once again the largest minority ethnic grouping, Pakistanis in Manchester are much fewer in number than in Bradford and so have exerted far less power locally. Overall, the Asian neighbourhoods of the 'Cottonopolis' have been of much less interest to journalists, researchers and other writers, who prefer social and cultural processes to be more dramatically announced. Nevertheless, like all the spaces considered here, Asian Manchester is characterised through exoticising references to food, especially in terms of the Curry Mile along Wilmslow Road in Rusholme, now the focus of a locally published novel by Hussain (2006). Despite its changing character given new migration from the Middle East, Rusholme remains a key stage for the performance – and policing (Hutnyk 2000) – of northern British-Pakistani masculinities, especially during Eid celebrations. It is a short distance too from where Ahmed Iqbal Ullah, a Bangladeshi boy, was the victim of a racist murder in his school's playground (see the 'Burnage report' by MacDonald 1990). Yet Manchester has also been home to various British-Asian intellectuals, professionals, artists and activists;[9] big city freedom makes it more open to 'mixed up' spaces that speak publicly of women's and queer British-Asian identifications.[10]

Birmingham:

Famed for its foundries, the West Midlands is also more ethnically diverse than the North of England. In Birmingham, Pakistanis and especially Kashmiris predominate yet again, but the city is also home to the single largest total of British Sikhs. In his classic contributions to urban sociology John Rex (Rex and Moore 1967; Rex and Tomlinson 1979) studied issues of housing, class and racism in the twin centres of Asian Birmingham: Pakistani Sparkbrook and Indian Handsworth. Inter-ethnic tensions inevitably sit side-by-side with cultural hybridity, something captured for example in the literary exploration of romantic liaisons across religious boundaries by Bhanot (2001). Beyond references to the Balti, representations of Pakistani Birmingham today are likely to link Sparkhill, Bosnia and Guantanamo Bay (Begg 2006). Similar patterns of multi-local diasporic mobilisation amongst Khalistani and non-Khalistani Sikhs reaching out to Panjab, East Africa and beyond cannot be ignored (Singh and Tatla 2006). Yet an oral history archive funded by Birmingham city council also points to the earlier and more secular, if equally internationally networked, organising of the Indian Workers' Association (IWA).[11] Of all the other cities apart from (west) London, just down

the M40 motorway, Birmingham is most key too as a centre of British-Asian popular culture and in particular the bhangra industry (Dudrah, 2007).[12]

Leicester:

Much smaller in scale than Birmingham, but with a city image more dominated today by its Asian presence, Leicester is traditionally associated with the light engineering and clothing/footwear industries. Home to the highest proportion of British-Indians, the most religiously diverse city outside London has the Gujaratis as its largest minority ethnic group (see the pictorial history of Martin and Singh 2002). The majority are Hindu, and about half are 'African Asian' heritage. The social capital of this urban middle/lower middle class from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda is an important factor in the city's success as a model for cohesion (see Singh 2003 on the 2001 Cantle report). In the case of the Ugandans, Marrett (1989) shows that they arrived with few financial resources and facing opposition to their settlement from the local council, media and political right. The twice migrants' recovery of their class position – as educated, English-speaking, traders or skilled craftsmen – as well as the impact of this locally along 'the Golden Mile' of Belgrave Road, is documented in cross-community oral history (Herbert 2008; Law and Haq 2007). Such processes were also played out notably in Asian women's struggles over pay, conditions and racism on the factory floor and in the community organising of the Belgrave Behano (see Westwood 1984; 1988; 1991). Indeed, beyond its current reputation for harmony, what may be one of the first minority white cities in Europe is actually no stranger to conflict and segregation.[13]

Multi-disciplinary perspectives and cross-cutting themes:

As funding came from the AHRC to applicants in a Faculty of Arts, a further concern of the network was to examine how attention to history, literary/cultural production and religion might complicate or add nuance to some of the more dominant perspectives of the social sciences and social policy in narrating the stories of British-Asian cities. The conduct of the project also revealed significant discrepancies around the writing and public representation of British-Asian women's experiences, a hugely important theme not highlighted in the original network application.

History There is a dearth of serious historical scholarship on South Asians in Britain. A few good academic surveys now exist following a recent flurry of activity (for example, Brown 2006; Fisher et al. 2007; Visram 1986), but there is still a need to properly historicise the post-war/post-colonial period in particular. In contrast, since the accommodationist multicultural moment of the late 1970s and 1980s, oral history projects documenting both general processes of settlement or more particular forms of cultural expression and even political movements have been collected with local state or HLF support (for example, bhangra and the IWA in Birmingham). Innovative methods of data collection involving young people have also been employed at times, while photographs, DVDs and even

trilingual cartoons have been used for the purposes of dissemination (Bradford Heritage Recording Unit 1994; Haq 2007; Martin and Singh 2002; Ramamurthy 2006). However, while oral history is well developed in Leicester, both at the university and via the East Midlands Economic Network, and Eade et al. (2006) in Tower Hamlets represents another collaboration across higher education, state and community sectors, archivists in Bradford reported fears of their extensive resources going unused. Thus, in the study of Asian Britain there is a need for closer links between academic and oral histories, not least to expose data to more significant contextualisation and interpretation.[14]

Literary/cultural production:

As well as celebrated London-based writers and their novels, for example Ali (2003), the project has drawn attention to the less well-known and quite differently positioned subjectivities and texts of northern authors such as Mehmood (1983), Alam (2002) and Hussain (2006) (cf. also Birmigham-based Bhanot 2001). Thus, as well as being a vehicle for diasporic self-representation, literary production raises other issues about location, from the political economy of a publishing industry based in the capital and the exoticising gaze of 'mainstream' audiences, to contestation around the position of authors vis-a` -vis the 'communities' they invoke (cf. Nasta 2001 and Procter 2003 on the likes of Rushdie, Kureishi and others). As suggested already, literature in vernacular languages is also hugely significant in the diasporic public sphere, although many academics are insufficiently aware of it. The idea of 'writing' the regional variety of British-Asian expression also needs to be extended beyond the text to the role of performance culture. See, for example, the work of Manchester-based poet, Shamshad Khan (2007), a book and touring exhibition about bhangra which brought together the academy, Birmingham council and a local record company (Dudrah 2007), as well as David (2005) on garba and dandiya in British Hindu communities in Leicester and London.[15]

Religion The various guises of the category 'religion', so key a trope in writing about South Asia and its diaspora, was a theme apparent in processes at work across all British Asian cities. At Leicester, it was shown that 1) since the 1960s it has been a vehicle for reinforcing and even sanctifying ethnic and other differences in terms of access to places of worship (David 2005; cf. Kalsi 1992, on Bradford). Yet, religion is also 2) a good symbolic resource for organising temporary unity across such differences vis-a-vis outsiders. The case of Bradford (Lewis 1994) illustrates that in the 1980s local government reinforced a tendency amongst South Asian communities to organise around religion, not least in claims for public recognition in arenas such as education. Since the 1990s these debates have shifted from the local to national levels, as well as more decisively from race to faith relations (Modood 2005; Nye 2000; Zavos 2009). In Birmingham, it became clear, too, that religion is 3) a powerful resource for moral and spiritual resistance to the excesses of capitalism, although translocal networks of actors can take both quietist and more revolutionary forms (cf. Werbner 2003 and Begg 2006 on Sufism and Islamism; also Singh and Tatla 2006, on competing Sikh tendencies). However, reflection on the Tower Hamlets event suggested that all of the above

form a collection of dominant constructions of the category 'religion' which obscure its more non-institutional and individual, popular and syncretic forms, for example, in terms of Qawwali or Baul music (cf. Eade et al. 2006; Sharma et al. 1996).[16]

Women's experiences:

The gendered framing of the network and the processes surveyed, whether in terms of public representations of identity written in English or migration itself, meant that women's experiences were not a deliberate focus for investigation. Nevertheless, with due attention again to Orientalising tropes essentialising Asian women as passive victims of patriarchal culture, four key arenas were identified, all characterised by scholarly writing that stresses women's struggles for agency in British-Asian cities. This is work often undertaken by female academics impacted by feminism, many more of whom are now of South Asian heritage (see Puwar and Raghram 2003). In anthropological accounts of Bradford, Manchester and different parts of London since the 1970s there is a focus on 1) the re-construction of domestic spaces, relations, ideologies, rituals and related social change amongst migrants, their daughters and grand-daughters (Ballard 1994; Bhachu 1985; Gardner 2002; Saifullah-Khan 1977; Werbner 1990). In sociological/cultural studies/activist accounts of the Midlands and London from the same period, 2) political organising was more apparent, in terms of creating/supporting organisations, challenging unequal gender, race and labour relations or violence against women, and supporting international struggles (Brah 1996; Parmar 1982; Westwood 1988; Wilson 1978). There is related work, too, especially in terms of Muslims since the 1980s, on 3) state recognition, from 'separate' schools to veiling, as well as state regulation of marriage, key concerns being liberal multiculturalism's inadvertent support for fundamentalism and a return to more integrationist government agendas (Murphy 1987; Sahgal and Yuval-Davis 1992; Samad and Eade 2003). Finally 4) newer work highlights the production and consumption of diverse, trans-locally circulating cultural matter, from music to fashion (Bhachu 2004; Dwyer 2004; Sharma et al. 1996).[17]

Conclusion:

Having completed the AHRC-funded phase of the Writing British Asian Cities project, it is hoped that the working papers and other resources lodged on the website will be of use to both postdoctoral and postgraduate researchers, as well as to university teachers and those outside academia. Indeed, the network will be maintained electronically through a networking database hosted on the website and interested parties are encouraged to register their details.[18] The network has also been accepted as one of BASAS's research groups, the only one explicitly concerned with UK diasporas.[19] Following the successful meetings organised at BASAS and ECMSAS, as well as the final symposium, the plan is to convene an annual meeting either at these conferences or in Leeds. In terms of research agendas moving forward, a number of possible avenues suggest themselves. An historical, ethnographic and spatial analysis of iconic locations in the five cities could prove very fruitful, perhaps in terms

of: 1) Asianised streets from Soho Road in Birmingham to Brick Lane in London; or 2) the temporary microcosms of locality manifest in the cities' melas (fairs). More generally, the significance of writing the diaspora in British-Asian vernacular languages has already been highlighted. There is also no definitive account of the representation of South Asians in the UK media,[20] although there is a burgeoning literature on Muslims and Islamophobia. The full variety of Asian Londons also deserves greater attention in its own right, in terms of both its more suburban outposts, and the overarching impact of living in an undoubted global city characterised by 'superdiversity'. In contrast, a study of the increasingly distinctive regional character of the British-Pakistani-Muslim North of England may also be in order, particularly in terms of the significance of towns rather than cities.

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Notes:

1. N.B. a volume co-edited by the applicants will be published by Routledge.

2. See www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/project_participants2.htm.

3. See www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/index.htm.

4. The abstracts, presentations, as well as digital sound and pictures from the event, are all lodged at: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/symposium.htm.

5. For a list of other projects, see: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/ahrc.htm.

6. For details of the ECMSAS panel, 'Writing the cities of South Asian diasporas worldwide', see: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/assets/WBAC_Panel_Final_SMcL. doc.

7. See Eade's working paper: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/assets/papers/WBAC002.pdf.

8. See McLoughlin's working paper: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/assets/papers/WBAC003.pdf.

9. See Ramamurthy (2008), for example, on the Asian Youth Movements (AYMs) in Manchester and Bradford.

10. See Kalra's working paper: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/assets/papers/WBAC005.pdf.

11. See www.connectinghistories.org.uk/collections/indian_workers_association.asp.

12. See Gale's working paper: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/assets/papers/WBAC004.pdf.

13. See Virdee's working paper: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/assets/papers/WBAC006.pdf.

14. See Gould and Qureshi's working paper: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/assets/papers/WBAC007.pdf.

15. See Kabir's working paper: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/assets/papers/WBAC008.pdf.

16. See McLoughlin and Zavos's working paper: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/assets/papers/WBAC009.pdf.

17. See Tomalin's working paper: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/assets/papers/WBAC010.pdf.

18. See www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/table.htm.

19. See www.basas.org.uk/research.htm.

20. But see Malik (2002) on 'black' and Asian images on television.

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