



Making Bengali Brick Lane: claiming and contesting space in East London

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Abstract

Based on a recent empirical project on 'the Bengal diaspora', the paper explores the construction and contestation of meanings around the iconic East London street, Brick Lane. Taking the 2006 protests around the film *Brick Lane* as its starting point, the paper draws on original interviews conducted in 2008 with a range of Bengali community representatives, to examine the narratives of space, community and belonging that emerge around the idea of Brick Lane as the 'cultural heartland' of the British Bangladeshi community. By exploring the representation, production and contestation of 'social space' through everyday practices, the paper engages with and contests the representation of minority ethnic 'communities' in the context of contemporary multicultural London and examines the process of 'claiming' and 'making' space in East London. In so doing, the paper contributes to a critical tradition that challenges essentialising and pathologizing accounts of ethnic communities and racialized spaces, or that places them outside of broader social and historical processes – redolent, for example, in contemporary discussions about 'parallel lives' or 'the clash of civilizations'. By contrast, this paper views social space as *made* through movement and narration, with a particular emphasis on the social agency of local Bengali inhabitants and the multiple meanings that emerge from within this 'imagined community'. However, rather than simply stressing the unfinished and processual nature of spatial meanings, the paper insists on the historical, embodied and affective dimensions of such meaning making, and a reckoning with the broader social and political landscape within which such meanings take shape. The focus on Brick Lane provides an empirically rich, geographically and historically located lens through which to explore the complex role of ethnicity as a marker of social space and of spatial practices of resistance and identity. By exploring Bengali Brick Lane through its narratives of past, present and future, these stories attest to the symbolic and emotional importance of such spaces, and to their complex imaginings.

Keywords: British Bangladeshis; Brick Lane; social space; spatial practices; community

There are no facts on Brick Lane: there are only the stories that people tell
(Sean Carey, in conversation, 2008)

Introduction: The Battle for Brick Lane¹, 2006

When you turn the corner into Brick Lane in London's Shoreditch, the whiff of aromatic spices and strains of Bengali pop music are unmistakable. A busy, vibrant street, this heady mix of East London and the Indian subcontinent was also the scene of a noisy and passionate protest on Sunday. (*bbc.co.uk* 31 July 2006)

In July 2006, reports grew in the British press about a series of demonstrations in Brick Lane, in Tower Hamlets, East London. The demonstrations, against the filming of Monica Ali's (2003) eponymous novel in the area, were led by a small number of local traders and businessmen concerned about the negative portrayal of the area and the Bangladeshi community more broadly. BBC News Online reported that on the last weekend in July, in the latest of a series of demonstrations, 'some 120 members of the Bangladeshi community from London and beyond marched in protest' against the filming (*bbc.co.uk* 31 July 2006). The protests were apparently sparked by two main concerns: first, anger at the representation of the area's predominantly Sylheti community in Ali's book as 'dirty little monkeys', 'Uneducated, Illiterate. Close minded' (*Guardian* 27 July 2006); second, about rumoured scenes in the film which depicted lice falling from a Bangladeshi woman's hair into a pot of curry in a Brick Lane restaurant. The co-ordinator of the demonstrations, Abdus Salique, Chair of the Brick Lane Traders' Association, was quoted as stating, 'we don't want a film which degrades our community' (*Guardian* 27 July 2006), while Muhammed Haque, co-ordinator of the Campaign against the Defamation of the Community in the East End of London, said: 'We need the East End of London to be accurately and ethically portrayed, not subjected to distortion, misrepresentation and stereotyping. We have spent a long time in creating a semblance of a tolerant society here' (*Independent* 22 July 2006).

The protests were the latest episode in an ongoing controversy around Ali's book, which had been condemned by some British Bangladeshis on its publication for being 'insulting and shameful' (*Guardian* 20 December 2003). With Salique threatening book burnings (*Guardian* 27 July 2006) and the press warning of incipient community violence (*The Times*, 22 July 2006), the protests became the focus of a heated national debate that transcended the boundaries of this more local dispute and allegedly scuppered the Royal Film performance the following year (*Daily Mail* 26 September 2007). Echoes of the *Satanic Verses* affair of 1989 were underscored by the interventions of Germaine Greer and Salman Rushdie, the former arguing for the protection

of a marginalized and misunderstood community – ‘For people who don’t have much else, self-esteem is crucial’ (*Guardian* 24 July 2006) – the latter castigating Greer’s support for the protesters as ‘philistine, sanctimonious and disgraceful’ (*Guardian* 29 July 2006). The protesters themselves were almost uniformly condemned and dismissed as ‘a tiny group of illiberal, intolerant men’ (*The Times* 26 October 2006) or indeed as ‘a howling reactionary mob’, ‘ultra-conservatives. . . trying to silence women from their own neighbourhoods who are bravely calling for change’ (*Independent* 30 July 2006). Only one article in the *Guardian* noted the apparent anomaly that this ‘mob’ of demonstrators ‘involved all the usual suspects, a medley of respected community activists and high ranking figures from Tower Hamlets’ Bangladeshi community who have been staunchly involved in demonstrations for worthy causes for years . . . veterans who will always attend rallies to “speak up for truth”, come rain or even hurricane’ (*Guardian* 1 August 2006).

It is not the purpose of the current paper to rehearse the complex rights and wrongs of this series of events, nor to question whose freedom of expression is at stake in such encounters. The present paper is focused more on the central role played in this drama by Brick Lane itself – at once an icon of multicultural exotica and an incipient threat posed by cultural and religious difference, as captured in the opening portrait by BBC News. This iconic space forms the locus for a broader set of struggles around ethnicity, community and nation, multiculturalism and its imagined limits, and the politics of representation. Certainly, the media representation of the area is riven with ambiguity, with Greer’s ‘sanctimonious’ picture of an oppressed and voiceless minority clashing with the image of a vocal and oppressive religious patriarchy, and both at odds with the, admittedly less popular, image of a community mobilized in self-defence, or, indeed, a community largely indifferent to the book, the film and the protests. Perhaps, as Greer has argued, ‘there is no representation without misrepresentation’ (*Guardian* 24 July 2006).

Nevertheless, there is room for nuance. Amidst the media furor, the voices of Bangladeshi Brick Lane were largely absent, and the picture was one devoid of historical or social context and depth. Drawing on a series of interviews conducted with Bangladeshi community representatives in the summer and autumn of 2008, the present paper aims to explore the complex and often contested meanings of Brick Lane as ‘the heartland of the Bangladeshi community’ from within the local Bangladeshi community itself. The paper argues that Brick Lane can be read as a site in which dominant and demotic meanings of community, ethnicity, history and culture are played out, struggled over and resisted (LeFebvre 1991). Brick Lane is most often positioned as representative of both the successes and failures of British multiculturalism, particularly linked to ideas of ethnic segregation, religio-cultural difference, poverty and threat (Begum and Eade 2005). Such discourses draw on and reinscribe traditional understandings of ethnic communities as ‘ghettos’ – ethnically marked,

anachronistic, bounded spaces inseparable from ideas of cultural difference and social decay (Tonkiss 2005). By contrast, contemporary theorizations posit social space as *made* through movement and narration (De Certeau 1984), emphasizing the unfinished, multiple and processual nature of spatial meanings. However, such approaches have tended to downplay the historical and affective dimension of such meaning making by and within marginalized communities and have erased the broader social and political landscape in which such meanings take shape (LeFebvre 1991).

Through the stories of Brick Lane narrated by my interviewees, this paper explores the process of 'claiming' and 'making' space for and by British Bangladeshis. It argues that an engagement with such stories necessitates an interrogation of the easy assumptions of ethnic communities and identities, reveals the more contested and porous boundaries of both material and imagined spaces and recognizes the role of the agency and subjectivity of individuals and groups within those spaces. In particular the paper argues for a reckoning with five inter-connected, and often neglected, dimensions of ethnic spatial formation and practices: first, the role of the *affective* in the formation and claiming of space; second, the role of personal, community and spatial *histories*; third, the *embodied* nature of creating and claiming space; fourth, the ways in which these embodied struggles mould the *material* structure of space; and fifth, the way in which making and claiming space is a form of *engagement* with broader social processes and societal structures. As such, the paper challenges the two-dimensional and essentialized versions of the Bangladeshi presence in the East End (and in Britain more broadly) and offers an alternative set of (historically and geographically located) narratives.

Researching 'the Bengal Diaspora' in Britain

The protests over the filming of *Brick Lane* in the summer of 2006 coincided with the start of a three year AHRC funded project on 'the Bengal diaspora',² which explored the history and experiences of migration of Bengali Muslims from the Indian state of Bengal in the period after 1947. The research team worked in South Asia and Britain, collecting the life histories of around 180 first generation migrants.³ Our starting point in Britain was, perhaps inevitably, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, where Brick Lane is located, and which is home to around 65,000 Bangladeshi heritage people, comprising about 1/5 of Britain's Bangladeshi population (Peach 2005). Already acutely aware of the significance of Tower Hamlets as the political and cultural 'heart-land' of the British Bangladeshi community and intrigued by the furore over the filming, and drawing on contacts established as part of the broader project, in 2008 I began a more self-contained series of interviews with a range of community representatives and activists working within and across a range of

fields to explore the history and significance of Bangladeshi Brick Lane. However, in contrast to the bigger project, which was focused on capturing the stories of 'ordinary' and 'invisible' migrants, these eighteen interviews were deliberately focused on 'the usual suspects' – key and well known local community figures, most of whom had a long history in the area – to try and access their official and personal narratives of Brick Lane. The interviews were drawn from a purposive sample of religious leaders, councillors, restaurant owners, cultural practitioners and activists, all of whom had played an active and significant role in the formation of Bengali Brick Lane. The interviews covered their more personal histories of migration and settlement as well as exploring some of the key transformations of the area in the past forty years in which they played a crucial role.⁴ My aim was avowedly *not* to uncover the 'truth' about Brick Lane, but to explore some of its complex surface contours, recognizing and welcoming the partiality of the stories I was told and the fragmented, but still fascinating, picture I was able to weave from them. As Sean Carey, an independent researcher who has worked around Brick Lane for over twenty years, remarked to me as he gave me his personal tour of Brick Lane one October evening in 2008, 'there are no facts on Brick Lane, there are only the stories that people tell'.

Narrating Brick Lane: ethnicity, community and symbolic spaces.

'Facts' aside, as Germaine Greer commented, one of the reasons for the protest against both Ali's novel and the later film was that 'Brick Lane is a real place' and that the novel's success partly hinged on that implicit reality, or at least the 'pre-existing stereotype' which passed for it (*Guardian* 24 July 2006). The symbolic importance of Brick Lane both in and of itself, and as emblematic of the British Bangladeshi community, lies at the centre of this struggle – in an interview just prior to the demonstrations, Monica Ali was quoted 'the . . . symbol of the Bangla community in England is Brick Lane, at the heart of the Bangladeshi community' (*Icons* 20 June 2006). What the symbol represents is, however, rather more problematic – Ali later told the *Washington Post* that 'Anyone who cares to can find out that there is overcrowding and drug abuse in the Bangladeshi community in London's East End. *You don't even have to go there*' (*Guardian* 1 August 2006, my emphasis).

The duality of Ali's representation of Brick Lane – at once 'the heart of the Bangladeshi community' and a space seemingly knowable (to 'anyone who cares to . . . you don't even have to go there') through a slew of social and cultural problems linked to that community – marks out the ambiguous contours through which such ethnicized spaces are conventionally (mis)understood. Fran Tonkiss has noted (2005) that classic urban theory has posited an ongoing tension between the city as an amorphous and anomic

space and the apparent persistence of 'pre-modern' or 'non-urban' residual social ties captured in the notion of 'community' (cf Alleyne 2002). Tonkiss argues that, drawing on Chicago School traditions of social and cultural ecology, these communities 'appeared like villages in the city, based on familiarity and shared cultural norms, and usually transported by rural incomers or foreign immigrants' (2005: 9), and came increasingly to stand as markers of ethnic and classed difference (Alexander and Knowles 2005; Keith 2005). Neighbourhoods in turn 'architecturally encoded' ethnic difference (Alexander and Knowles 2005: 5), making ideologies of racial and cultural antagonism visible in concrete and spatial terms, which were often viewed as synonymous with exclusive and exclusionary boundaries of 'community'. These ethnically marked communities or 'enclaves' are, moreover, conflated with a series of seemingly inherent and intractable social problems – seen as a world apart, socially segregated, spatially bounded, and temporally distant and distinct, where locale maps seamlessly onto social formations and affective affiliations that define the borders and content of the imagined 'ghetto'.

The East End of London has long stood as an exemplar of sociological community studies approaches to these 'villages in the city'. Young and Wilmott's classic 1957 study of *Family and Kinship in East London*, pointed to the existence of enduring social and family ties amongst white working-class communities in Bethnal Green in the face of postwar social change, while more recent work by Phil Cohen (1998), and Janet Foster (1999) has explored the construction of narratives of white indigeneity and around the Docklands area in the face of encroaching City developments and the arrival of large-scale non-white immigration in the area.⁵ As Tonkiss argues, however, the danger with the reification of community in these accounts is that it often seeks to deny difference, exchange and historicity to privilege a sentimental nativism – 'a rejection of the urban as a space of strangers, a retreat to familiarity and intimacy as the safest space to be' (2005: 26). The dangers of sentimental attachments to 'community' in East London has most recently been exemplified by *The New East End* (Dench, Gavron and Young 2006), which revisited Young and Wilmott's earlier study to paint a picture of white 'indigenous' Eastenders under threat from the influx of Bangladeshi 'newcomers' and the multicultural conspiracies of middle class social engineers.

Nevertheless, such research points to the significance of 'making and holding space' (Tonkiss 2005: 17) as a form of community identity work, both engaging external representations and as a source of internal defence and affiliation. This engagement belies simplistic attributions of insularity and separation – space both matters and is made to matter as part of a broader system of social representations and structures (Alexander and Knowles 2005). In particular, these symbolic sites can be claimed as spaces of resistance, which produce 'counter-spaces' (LeFebvre 1991: 381–2), which contest dominant forms of representation or attempts at control through the marking of 'territory'

(Alexander and Knowles 2005). However, space is conceptualized here not as a bounded, homogeneous and ahistorical 'community' but one which is internally differentiated, its imagined borders traversed and porous, its meanings made and remade through the everyday encounters and practices of people (De Certeau 1984). This approach recognizes too that 'place' is often formed at the point of convergence of different migrant movements and encounters (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Keith 2005) in which narratives of 'home', 'native' and 'immigrant' become interwoven.

The role of (personal and community) history in the meaning-making of particular spaces is a crucial, but perhaps under-researched, element in the imagination of the city or the neighbourhood (Eade 2000; Keith 2005). Levitt and Jaworsky point to the cultures and histories of migrant movements as the 'underlying geographical strata [which] affect the shape and form of subsequent layers' (2007: 144) and note further that 'Migrants' place-making ability, and how they go about it, is shaped by prior cultural intersections in any given place and how they are articulated over time' (2007: 144). More than this, however, these histories and cultures intersect with personal narratives and journeys that contest and recreate dominant scripts and meanings, and which in turn reconstitute the materiality of the city itself – what De Certeau (1984) has termed 'spatial stories'. As Tonkiss argues 'The spaces of the city are overlaid by memory, by unbidden associations, by conscious or unconscious plots' (2005: 128). Transcending the dismissive attribution of simple 'nostalgia', these stories testify to the more embodied and sensory experience of what Avtar Brah has evocatively termed 'the scent of memory'. Brah writes of the streets of Southall:

As I retrace, certain contours begin to take shape: bodies, landscapes, sights, smells; sensations of fear and threat, of belonging, unbelonging, and sometimes alienation; of familiarity and estrangement, of love and hate; memories of blood on the street, excitement of political mobilisation, and optimism that comes in the wake of daring to imagine futures of hope when confronted with despair (1999: 16)

Brah's powerful sense-memory narration attests to the complex and fragmented ways in which space is made to matter, not as a bounded site of belonging and comfort but as a locus for multiple and contradictory claims, histories, trajectories, migrations, which shape the experience of its inhabitants and their attachment to place. Geography is thus interwoven with history, the material with the affective, in ways which disrupt and unsettle dominant ways of knowing the city (Keith 2005). As Alexander and Knowles write:

Space is not a 'thing' but the outcome of past and present activities and social relationships: the social contexts of earlier networks coexist with new ones so that space always contains multiple temporalities, just as it sustains

multiple and contradictory uses, meanings, associations with different kinds of people. Space both reveals social priorities . . . and provides for alternate voices, uses and versions of what matters (2005: 4–5).

Hidden histories, resisted pasts

Space, then, both matters and is *made to matter*, and its meanings are intricately bound with both the subjective histories and embodied practices of its inhabitants, through which it is experienced and understood (De Certeau 1984; LeFebvre 1991). One of the key tensions in the *Brick Lane* protests was around the symbolic meaning of Brick Lane, and the East End more generally, as an historic space of migration, and the place of the Bangladeshi community within this history. As Sarah Gavron, the director of the film, explained, this broader history was one which gave the domestic story a broader emotional and historical resonance:

I think it [the story] appealed to lots of people because while it was set in this very particular community, it's really a story of migration . . . Brick Lane's more symbolic . . . [It's] the immigrant story and the search for home and who we are.

Historically, of course, the East End has always been a place of migration – a place of arrival and of ‘foreignness’ and perhaps because of this it has always had a rather ambiguous reputation. Geoffrey Chaucer, for example, wrote in the fourteenth century of Flemish weavers being chased by angry locals. Since then, the East End became the home of waves of immigrants, including French Huguenot silkweavers, Irish dockworkers, Jewish refugees, Chinese opium dealers and sailors from across the world (Eade 2000). It has also long been an area of poverty, associated with crime and vice – ‘a land of beer and blood’ as the Rector of Christchurch said of Brick Lane in the 1880s (Thornbury 1873: 45). The area also has a long tradition of radical politics and social dissent and of racist and anti-racist mobilization, most famously, of course, the Battle of Cable Street in 1936, where Jewish anti-fascists and communists took on Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, a precursor to the anti-racist struggles of the Bengalis in the 1970s (Eade 2000).

It is against and within this longer history that the Bengali presence and the identity of Bengali Brick Lane itself takes shape. Thus, several of the people I interviewed explicitly placed the history of Bengalis as part of this bigger historical picture.⁶ Ruhul Amin, who was assistant director on the *Brick Lane* film, and who had arrived in Brick Lane as a teenager in 1975, recalled:

When I came to this area, I saw a wonderful Jewish community . . . There were streets . . . with so many shops, whole rows of Jewish shops and

bearded Jewish men with their caps and everything . . . And the shops were so colourful and had wonderful lights. And we used to have Greek people there, Irish people there, of course the white East Enders, so it was very mixed . . . Where is that wonderful Jewish community now?

Rajonuddin Jalal, who came to Tower Hamlets in 1972, as a thirteen year old, and later became a local councillor, also reflected:

In the early 70s . . . you would have had all the other Asian communities – the pattern of migration is that Jews came here and went to other places and I think it would be the same for other people who came to Tilbury docks – from Pakistan, India, Africa, some Somalis . . . I think you would have had a mixture of all of these communities – Turkish, Maltese, the whole lot . . . So it's a place for immigrants – people tend to come here and move on.

Several of the interviewees pointed to Brick Lane Mosque as the concrete testament to this history of migration. Mahmoud Rauf, a local businessman, who had lived and worked in the area since 1968, told me:

Brick Lane Mosque is telling the history of the area. The history of the immigrants of the area, actually . . . During the eighteenth century the protestants came from France – they established it as a church. After quite a few years, they moved out. Jewish people came in this area, they bought it. They transformed it as a synagogue. The Jewish people moved out of this area. The Bengali Muslims came to this area. They bought it in 1976 . . . to convert into a mosque.

Sajjid Miah, Chair of Brick Lane Mosque Committee similarly commented:

The history behind this building, it is unique . . . it has been used for a Huguenot Church and then a Jewish synagogue for a long time and then it comes to us the Muslims, and we are using it since 76. The building has a unique history itself and that interests lots of people, not only from the Muslim community but people from other communities.

The story of the Bengali community on Brick Lane is one of claiming space both as part of this longer history of migration and settlement and the emergence of a specific community identity at a particular historical moment. As Ruhul Amin made clear, this is also about claiming a place in the national history of Britain – in which Brick Lane becomes symbolic of a larger Imperial and post-Imperial story. Although he was assistant director on the film, he argued that it is against this history of struggle and community formation the *Brick Lane* protests needed to be placed, to fully understand what he termed the 'hurt' that a tradition of stereotyping and misrepresentation had inflicted:

If you look at this Bengali community . . . if anyone comes from outside and writes about these communities people do feel hurt. Why? Because there is a journey started from First World War, the contribution of Bengalis during the World Wars . . . for the merchant navy . . . and a lot of people died because they fuelled those ships during the war time. Now the journey, they came, they settled in this country, made a community, generation after generation they made sacrifices . . . And these poor people were not only making a community here but they were law-abiding citizens . . . hard-working people, working day and night in sweatshops . . . Nobody ever mentioned that contribution . . . So what I am saying is that there is a very false notion of community, and people looking at that, and a lot of stigma attached. There is also racism.

The significance of Brick Lane for the people I interviewed was centred on the struggle against racism that many of them had waged when they arrived in Britain in the 1970s. Most arrived as young men, to join relatives who were already in the area working in the Jewish owned garment and leather factories, and were faced with the daily and often violent racism of the National Front. Helal Abbas, who later became the first Bangladeshi Leader of Tower Hamlets' Council, arrived as a boy in Brick Lane in 1971, to join his father. He described the situation at that time:

People were living with real fear, fear of being murdered, fear of being beaten up, fear of walking the streets safely. I used to live on Chicksand Estate [behind Brick Lane], which is about 400 yards away from my school and the number of times I used to duck and dive to get to the school and come home safely, it was the major issue for me. Not about what am I going to do in my lessons, what am I going to learn, it was about can I get to school safely? Am I going to be free today from being beaten up in the playground? Can I run home safely and lock the door behind me and watch TV rather than go out and play?

Rajonuddin Jalal, who was one of the founders of the Bangladeshi Youth Movement who took on the racists, told me:

As the [Bengali] community grew in Tower Hamlets, Bengalis became noticed and the murder of Altab Ali, Ishaq Ali and Michael Ferreira in Hackney⁷ were against a background of persistent racist attacks in the East End of London – on the housing estates, in the streets. Everyday harassment. I was beaten up a few times, and most other people who lived here. And so I think the younger generation realized they had to stay in this country and decided to fight back . . . And I think there was a phase in the mid-70s when the Bengali community came of age. These murders . . . created the impetus for going public with the resistance and eventually the racist thugs were polarized and were driven out of the area.

The mid-1970s and early 1980s saw Brick Lane transformed into a site of organized anti-racist resistance from within the Bengali community (Leech 1980). Shiraj Haque, now a prominent restaurant owner on Brick Lane, was actively involved in organizing local youths to challenge racist activity during the 1970s. He told me:

We used to take control of some of the youth clubs in the area where our boys were not allowed to go. We directly forced ourselves into it, fighting our way . . . Also street battles we used to fight. We had a lot of bad experiences. At the end of Brick Lane there used to be a large group of racists selling their literature, newspapers and so on – every Sunday in their hundreds and our people used to be scared about it. So we would occupy that particular spot early on so they don't have this position.

The murder of Altab Ali in May 1978 is seen by many as a definitive turning point in Bengali community self-organization in Brick Lane. Ten days after the murder, a march was organized from Brick Lane to Westminster with a rally in Hyde Park (Leech 1980). Rajonuddin Jalal, who was one of the organizers of the march, described the events:

For the first time, Bengalis marched from Whitechapel to Parliament House, on the way round Hyde Park corner and back to Whitechapel. It took about 8 hours. About 10,000 people. That was the first time Bengalis came out.

These struggles, along with the growth of the Bengali population in the area from the late 1970s onwards, placed Brick Lane as the symbolic heartland of Britain's Bengali community. Ansar Ahmed Ullah, a local community historian and activist who has worked in the area since 1982, reflected:

In the 70s and 80s, you could say this place did offer a sense of safety, because of the sheer numbers of people here . . . So people felt safe to stay in the community for support – moral support, physical support . . . So in the 70s and 80s it did provide a safe haven, I guess, for our people.

Dilowar Hussain Khan, Chair of East London Mosque Committee, who had also been part of the anti-racist struggles of the 1970s, recalled:

I used to live in Wapping and our windows used to be broken almost every other week . . . and I was even attacked physically many times out on the streets. So that was everywhere apart from this area, Brick Lane, and this little island we had, this was like a safe haven.

As Ruhul Amin, who was a member of the youth movements in the 1980s, commented: 'Brick Lane is the centre of the Bengalis . . . they fought for that space, but those days are gone.'

Brick Lane to Banglatown: contested presents

Or perhaps not. As the coverage of the *Brick Lane* protests suggests, the ambiguous legacy of the East End has remained a constant feature of the area, with longstanding images of poverty and social decay overlaid with newer fears of cultural difference and the spectre of religious fundamentalism (Begum and Eade 2005). Indeed, as argued above, a key feature of the media representation of the protest was the rehearsal of broader national scripts around the 'clash of civilizations' and the 'death of multiculturalism' that has characterized much political rhetoric since 2001, and which drew too on long-established scripts of Brick Lane as a 'ghetto' community (Leech 1980; Glynn 2006). Sarah Gavron told me that the protests against the filming were 'tiny' but that:

It just got blown into this huge media story. Because it appealed to the media on so many levels, because it's about freedom of expression and so many things . . . Mostly I'd say we had support and mostly we were welcomed . . . [but] they don't make a news story . . . It wasn't the exciting story.

Ruhul Amin was even more caustic about the level and form of coverage of the protests. He told me the protests only disrupted one day of filming in Brick Lane itself, but that the media furore was out of all proportion to the events:

Just after that [the protests] I remember I was just walking through and there were like not less than ten, fifteen camera crews in Brick Lane outside the mosque, waiting and asking people as if there is another terrible crime they had committed, as if another suicide bombing or something was launched from there. 'These pathetic, terrible, British Muslims, they are talking about burning a book', it's all coming back to those stereotyped images . . . They were looking for a story, and this is a story to sell – it's so easy to sell.

The iconic status of Brick Lane as the heartland of the Bangladeshi community in Britain is inseparable from the external construction of the area, both historically and contemporarily, as an ethnic 'ghetto' (Leech 1980; Keith 2005; Glynn 2006).⁸ The perception is, in part, about numbers and density of population – the 2001 Census recorded around 65,500 Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets, comprising about 33 per cent of the local population (Peach 2005). In Spitalfields and Banglatown ward, which houses Brick Lane, and adjacent Whitechapel ward, Bangladeshis comprise over 50 per cent of the population (58 per cent and 52 per cent accordingly).⁹ However, like other iconic racialized spaces in London, such as Brixton and Southall, Tower Hamlets, the borough in which Brick Lane sits, has become associated with a specific minority ethnic community, so that Tower Hamlets comes to stand for the British Bangladeshi community as a whole – for good and ill.

As argued above, Tower Hamlets has a longstanding association with poverty and social decay, strongly linked to its history as a space of immigration and a zone of transition. Today the borough ranks third (out of 354) of all local authorities in England in terms of social deprivation (www.go-london.gov.uk). The Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets is often viewed as epitomizing these local social failings as well as those of the British Bangladeshi community more broadly. Ceri Peach has noted that the Bangladeshi community is 'poor, badly housed and poorly educated' (2005: 23) with high levels of segregation and extreme economic marginalization. Nationally, 65 per cent of Bangladeshi families live below the poverty line, with two-thirds of Bangladeshi children growing up in poverty. Bangladeshi men have four times the unemployment rates of white men, and Bangladeshi women six times the unemployment rate of white women. Nearly half of Bangladeshi women and 40 per cent of Bangladeshi men have no qualifications (Peach 2005). Indeed, 'the Bangladeshi community/boy/girl in Tower Hamlets' has become, for the press, politicians and policymakers alike, the personification of the failures of British multiculturalism.

This is, of course, only part of the story, and one which is undergoing constant and dramatic change, particularly amongst the younger generation (Glynn 2002). It is part of a story too that some Bengalis in Tower Hamlets tell themselves as part of their narration of becoming British – of the history of resistance described above, of cross-generational struggle and the role of Bangladeshis in the local political arena (Eade 1989; Keith 2005; Glynn 2006) and emerging political and commercial success. Perhaps the most concrete symbol (literally and figuratively) of this success has been the development of 'Banglatown' – the row of around sixty Bangladeshi restaurants and cafes that currently dominate the street from the intersection with Whitechapel Road to the Truman Brewery about half way up.

The development of the Banglatown project in and around Brick Lane from the mid 1990s onwards is beyond the scope of the current paper (see Keith 2005; Jacobs 1996; Begum 2004). What is of particular interest here, however, are the ways in which Banglatown was viewed by my interviewees as symbolic of the Bengali presence, both as a positive staking of a claim in multicultural Britain, and as a contested site around what this presence might mean in the contemporary moment. Most of the people I interviewed saw the development of Banglatown as a positive expression of Bengali success – as the culmination of Bengali presence and struggle, and particularly linked to the longer history of Brick Lane itself. When I asked Shamim Azad, a local poet and cultural activist who has lived in the area for twenty years, whether she 'liked' the Banglatown image, she responded 'it's more than a like, it's more than a look – it's a metaphor' and she continued, 'Bangladeshi sailors came here to this area... our forefathers came here... this is our forefathers' area, where people smelt the curry first'.

Rajonuddin Jalal, who was Chair of the Regeneration Committee, told me:

We were keenly aware of the historical significance, because of the history of migration in this area . . . through the different waves of migration people have established their identity, connection and culture in this area . . . I think the Bengali restaurants and the culinary experience that you go through on Brick Lane is about culture . . . Food is part of it – there are other things . . . Things that count in the community – food, music, fashion, culture.

Helal Abbas, who as a councillor was involved in the regeneration, similarly commented:

I think the symbol of Banglatown and Bangladeshis was an issue and a declaration of Banglatown, this gate outside here, was ‘this is our community, we are part of this borough’. Psychologically this was an important factor.

It is significant that for both Jalal and Abbas the Banglatown project was positioned as part of this longer history of migration – a way of staking a claim within multicultural Britain rather than the withdrawal from it. Nevertheless, the project has not been uncontroversial – particularly over the question of what version of Bengali identity is concretized within this space. Indeed, Brick Lane/Banglatown has become a highly contested site within the local Bengali community around issues of religion, region, gender, generation, commercialization and so on, which cannot be considered here. What is interesting, however, are the alternate perceptions of ‘Bengaliness’ which even those involved in the Banglatown development acknowledged. Jalal reflected:

The only thing you can see that are tangible achievements would be a few community centres, a few shop fronts on the restaurants, the Banglatown arch, the Shahid Minar . . . The Banglatown concept, though it officially exists . . . hasn’t really taken off.

Ansar Ahmed Ullah was critical of the way in which the concept was first adopted and then adapted by the regeneration committees:

The idea came from the community . . . as an acknowledgement of the strong Bengali community here . . . [But] for them it was the branding of this area, in order to attract tourists and businesses to this area . . . We wanted to give it a more physical look of Banglatown . . . we wanted all the signs in Bengali, we wanted a gate, a lamp-post, we wanted drawings on the road, we wanted some artificial balconies on the buildings, to give it more of a feel of the streets from Bengal. But that hasn’t happened, they are still fantasies in our minds.

Mahmoud Rauf, who was Chair of the Banglatown Consultative Forum, similarly argued:

Even now there is no sign of Banglatown in a real sense . . . Where is the sign of Banglatown here, is there any sign of Banglatown? We wanted it in a different way so that in 50 years they will know that these are the signs of Banglatown. There I can go and see the flavour of Banglatown. Where is the flavour of Banglatown? It's the flavour of currytown rather than a Banglatown.

Moving East: uncertain futures

If Banglatown encapsulated, and failed, different visions of what the Bengali contribution to Brick Lane might represent, it is nevertheless true that all the people I spoke to recognized the importance of the developments both as part of a longer history and as a claiming of a particular place (and time) for the Bengali community. Jalal commented to me that one of the key impetuses for the development of Banglatown for the local Bengali community was to defend the space of Brick Lane from the encroachment eastwards of the City of London (Jacobs 1996; Keith 2005):

You had the City of London still moving eastwards, driving people out from the Brick Lane area. The City filled it, you see . . . So if the Bengali community were going to survive we had to create a border with the City . . . This was a boundary defined by a desire to stay as a community.

Nevertheless, there are signs that the idea of Banglatown as a defended Bengali space has only been partially realized and, indeed, contains within itself the seeds of its own demise. Regeneration leading to gentrification and the rise of property values (Glynn 2005) on the one hand, and the movement of more prosperous Bengali families eastwards along the Central Line towards Newham and Essex, on the other, have meant that the Bengali identity of Brick Lane/Banglatown is seen as under erasure. Jalal explained:

People like me have moved out. I can't afford to live here any more because prices have gone up. . . . The people who are left are mainly people who want to be lost . . . families who are trapped because they can't afford to buy. Some of the people who have moved are people whose children are fourth generation Bengali migrants who've done well, got professional jobs or made money . . . they have moved out.

Given demographic changes to the area and potential threats to the continuation of the successes of Banglatown arising from gentrification, rising business costs and the saturation of the restaurant sector in the area, many felt that the identity of Brick Lane as a Bengali space in the future was uncertain. Ruhul Amin told me:

They [Bengalis] are already moving to various parts of the country. Now those who are left behind, they also won't be able to stay in Tower Hamlets because of the pressure of economics, because it's so close to the City. You can see a lot of white middle classes moving into this area . . . You can already see half of Brick Lane is like Covent Garden . . . A few will always be there, the restaurant owners, because Brick Lane is a restaurant district but of course in the future a lot of them will vanish because they won't be able to sustain because of the expense . . . Banglatown will always be there but it will be at the mercy of the middle classes.

Mahmoud Rauf, who has been a community activist in the area for over forty years, reflected:

We feel sad about it – those who worked . . . to make this happen, to make this area regenerated, to make this area habitable for the local people. Now it's going in the opposite direction, it makes us sad after all these years.

Others viewed this transition, however, as an inescapable and necessary part of the history of Brick Lane itself. Ruhul Amin commented:

I see it as inevitable . . . So now [we have] Banglatown and Bengali shops and it's all colourful and vibrant and all this, but they are disappearing. They don't live there. So symbolically, Banglatown will always be there but I think it is inevitable, people move on.

Similarly, Shamim Azad opined:

One day it will be a historical place that people will visit – like 'Bangladeshis once upon a time came here'. See all of these communities you see here in Brick Lane now, this is their arrival point . . . [but] Bangladeshi people are more in Redbridge than in Brick Lane . . . But there are certain marks that will be left by the Bangladeshis.

It is perhaps revealing that many of those I interviewed saw these marks in concrete, spatial terms – an inscription on the material fabric of Brick Lane itself. Helal Abbas thus said:

The mosques won't go, some of the businesses will remain, the landmarks we created, some of them will remain. The Shahid Minar, the gate, the naming of the streets, some of the estates, some of the schools. It will take a long time for the Bangladeshis to be eradicated from the area – maybe in about fifty, a hundred years and who cares, after that?

Or as cultural activist, Sayeeda Shikha put it: 'It's the history, innit? . . . Brick Lane is the same place – the people have moved'.

Conclusion: making Bengali Brick Lane

In 'Spatial Stories', de Certeau argues that 'Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice' (1984: 115). Just as every narrative entails movement through space and time, so every space is 'enunciated' through movement, through action, through events, and the recollection and narration of those events – the (hi)stories which bring the space into being and render it comprehensible. Within the bounds of 'a pre-established geography' (1984: 122), de Certeau comments 'everyday stories tell us what one can do in it and make out of it. They are treatments of space . . . a culturally creative act' (1984: 122–3). Stories open space for disjunction and contestation, for uncertainty and surprise, for what de Certeau evocatively terms 'delinquent narrativity' (1984: 130). While it has become something of a truism to argue that space is socially constructed and produced, what is less certain, as de Certeau himself acknowledges, are 'what actual changes produce this delinquent narrativity in a society' (1984: 130). De Certeau reflects, suggestively, that 'this delinquency begins with the inscription of the body in the order's text' (1984, see also Lefebvre 1991: 40), and it is perhaps here that the stories of Brick Lane recounted above take on a richer significance, a way of interrogating the largely unexamined empirical role of the racialized/ethnicized body or agent in the material landscape of the contemporary city.

As the protests around the filming of *Brick Lane* demonstrate, there is a tension between the dominant inscription of such iconic spaces, particularly when this intersects with broader ideological notions of ethnic or religious difference, and the more complex ways in which this difference is experienced, negotiated and contested at the level of the local and the everyday. Thus, while Brick Lane can on one level be 'told' and 'read' as an ambivalent icon of multicultural Britain – a paradoxical tale of 'parallel lives' and the commodification of ethnically specific 'cultural quarters' – these representations depend crucially on the marking of clearly defined spatial and imaginative (b)orders, which fix and regulate the conduct of ethno-religious bodies. Such 'ethnic' spaces, read through the lens of 'community' are over-determined from without, so that protest, or 'delinquent narratives', are understood only as threat – the *Brick Lane* protests thus become emblematic of the 'clash of civilizations', writ local.

However, the social production of space also incorporates the potential for subversion and imagination, for narratives and practices which engage, but are not synonymous with, dominant social discourse. The present paper has aimed to explore the multiple ways in which Brick Lane is made and narrated through a historically located set of 'spatial practices' and 'spatial stories'. In particular it has focused on the process of making, shaping and claiming space by local Bengalis, whose voices and experiences are too often erased, assumed or ventriloquized by others. It necessitates an interrogation

of the easy assumptions of ethnic communities and identities, to consider the more contested and porous boundaries of both material and imagined spaces, and to insist on the role of the agency and subjectivity of individuals and groups within those spaces. This is not simply to insist on multiplicity or on the challenge such encounters pose to dominant representations but, as the *Brick Lane* protests so dramatically capture, to argue that there are additional dimensions to the making and claiming of community that, while they may be theoretically acknowledged, rarely feature in sociological (or even fictional) accounts, and whose absence ‘thins’ analysis and understanding.

The account of Brick Lane, as space, as community, as icon, *as story*, explored above gestures towards five important, and interlinked, dimensions: first, the strong *emotional* attachment to, and investment in, place, and the integral role of the affective in the formation of individual and collective identities; second, the ways in which this emotional attachment is forged over time as well as in space, recognizing the role of (hi)stories – personal, community and/or place – in the making and claiming of space and belonging; third, embodied practices, which acknowledge both the specific experiences and actions of gendered and ethnic bodies and/in the physical creation and defence of place (for example, through anti-racist mobilization or violence); fourth, the ways in which the material structure of the space itself is moulded through and reflects these embodied struggles – street signs, mosques, restaurants, memorials; and fifth, the way in which making space is a form of engagement with broader social processes and societal structures, rather than withdrawal from them – a way of looking outwards as well as inwards. Making Brick Lane – its pasts, presents and futures – is making space within the British national story, the story of the East End, the story of the Bengal diaspora. It is a story of making home.

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Notes

1. Cf Johann Hari 'What's at stake in the Battle of Brick Lane' *Independent* 31 July 2006 www.independent.co.uk (accessed 21st February 2011).

2. 'The Bengal Diaspora: Bengali Settlers in South Asia and Britain' (AHRC Award Number AH/E501540/1). See also www.banglastories.org for more information on this project.

3. We worked in 4 sites in India and Bangladesh, including Kolkata, Dhaka, the Sundarbans/Bengal delta and along the northern India/Bangladesh border. In Britain, the sites were Tower Hamlets and Newham in London, Oldham and a dispersed network of restaurant workers and brides, to trace the mobility of the Bengali community within the UK (including Luton, Birmingham, Bradford, Burnley, Colchester).

4. All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed by the interviewer. They were analysed thematically, exploring the accounts as situated stories/versions located temporally and geographically (Bryman 2004).

5. The East End has also been the site of community studies of 'immigrant' communi-

ties, from Banton's *The Coloured Quarter* (1955) to Eade's analysis of *The Politics of Community* (1989).

6. It is important to note that Bengalis have been present in East London for nearly 400 years. See Adams 1987, Ullah and Eversley 2010 for a discussion of this history.

7. Altab Ali and Ishaq Ali were murdered by racists in Tower Hamlets in 1978. Michael Ferreira was murdered in a racist attack in Hackney the same year.

8. The term 'ghetto' is a highly charged and stigmatizing label, which belies a more diverse and complex reality. The term is used by Leech and Keith, and retained here, to indicate the external construction of areas like Tower Hamlets, with large minority ethnic communities, through a racialized ideological lens which assumes a problematic set of social, economic and cultural traits.

9. http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgs/351-400/367_census_information.aspx (accessed 21st February 2011). The majority of Bangladeshis in Britain are from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh.

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