



Diasporas,
migration
& identities



Arts & Humanities
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Writing British Asian Cities

www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities

Summary Report

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Seán McLoughlin, William Gould, Ananya J. Kabir and Emma Tomalin

Faculty of Arts
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT
UK

Project Summary:

The diverse regional character and trajectories of the South Asian diaspora in Britain today is mainly the product of post-war immigration from particular parts of India, modern Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as East Africa. Recognising an urgent need to reflect more carefully upon the changing dynamics of this UK presence, the network has been the first to highlight the local, regional and trans-national dimensions of British-Asian cities.

With a grant of £20,000 from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which is running a programme on Diasporas, Migration and Identity 2005-09, five meetings of academics and non-academics were held as follows:

- Bradford, Mumtaz Restaurant, June 2006
- London's East End, Kobi Nazrul Community Centre, September 2006
- Manchester, Indus 5 Restaurant, March 2007
- Leicester, the Peepul Centre, September 2007
- Birmingham, The Nishkam Civic Association, February 2008

The purpose of the meetings was to examine how each city space has been 'written' about and represented by different constituencies in terms of different sorts of 'texts':

- academic writing by sociologists, anthropologists and others
- aspects of local and national government policy, tourism and media coverage
- oral history collections and literary / cultural production from novels to music

Main Achievements:

- About 70 non-academics and 48 academics attended our city events. The former included: religious and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) organisations; research foundations and charities; local politicians and local government officials and policymakers; writers, poets, musicians, arts organisations, newspapers, local historians / archivists, regional publishers. These meetings identified resources such as oral history projects on the Indian Workers Association and Asian Youth Movements, as well as work in vernacular literatures. See www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/index.htm.
- Each city has a dedicated set of pages on our interactive website - www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities - which report on discussions at the events, as well as providing links to working papers on each city and other resources useful for research and teaching. There is a developing web montage of local people speaking about British-Asian Bradford and Manchester prepared by Irna Qureshi.

- The city events and website was managed by a steering committee of academics and non-academics. In addition to the Leeds team, there were 8 regular members: Aki Nawaz (head of Nation Records); Irna Qureshi (oral historian and freelance researcher); John Eade (Roehampton / Surrey); John Zavos and Virinder Kalra (Manchester); Richard Gale (Birmingham); Pippa Virdee (De Montfort) and Shailaja Fennell (Cambridge). See www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/project_participants2.htm
- A two-day symposium was also organised in Leeds, 17-18 March 2008. www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/symposium.htm. A number of other scholars working on South Asian Diasporas in the UK attended, e.g. the Bengali Diaspora, the Grunwick and Gate Gourmet disputes, Asians in Britain 1870-1950. See www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/ahrc.htm
- The network has been accepted as one of the British Association of South Asian Studies' research groups, the only one concerned with the UK diaspora. See www.basas.org.uk/research.htm. The plan is to hold an annual meeting. The network will also be maintained electronically through a database of interested parties. See www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/table.htm.

Representations of the Cities:

As well as mapping how the Asian presence in each of the five cities has been written and represented, our working papers begin to tease out something of the distinctive character of each space in terms of the multiple forces at work locally, regionally and beyond Britain.

- *London's East End* – the capital city today is ethnically super-diverse and from Southall in the West to Neasden in the north, there are many Asian Londons. Once an imperial city and is now truly global, the long history of immigration to London is rooted in the East End near the docks (Eade 2000). Today boroughs like Tower Hamlets are the centre of Bangladeshi Britain (Adams 1987; Eade 1989; Gardner 1994, 2002). Brick Lane has become Banglatown in local government and tourist representations but this key space has also been the site of resistance to racism during the 1970s (Dhondy's *Iqbal Café*, 1978) and more recently arguments about Sylheti and non-Sylheti representations of the community in Monica Ali's (2003) novel. Secular and religious identities also compete in the recollections of the Swadhinata oral history project (Eade et al, 2006) and Ed Hussain's novel, *The Islamist* (2007)
 - For a fuller discussion see: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/london.htm

Bradford – The 'Worstedopolis' is essentially the largest of the former woollen (and cotton) mill towns strung out across the Pennines without quite being an industrial city. It has struggled to reinvent itself in the post-industrial era having a dual identity as gateway to both the rural Bronte country of the Dales and urban Bradistan (Procter 2003). The latter is associated with a large and politically dominant Pakistani and especially Kashmiri heritage Muslim population from rural Mirpur. However, national news of successful coexistence and brave experiments in multiculturalism from the 1960s eventually gave way to huge interest in and documentation of the contested struggles and conflicts surrounding the Bradford 12 and during the Honeyford and Rushdie affairs in the 1980s (see Mehmood's *Hand on the Sun*, 1983; Murphy's *Tales of Two Cities*, 1987; Lewis' *Islamic Britain*, 1994), as well as following riots during 1995 and 2001 (Ouseley 2001; Alam 2002; Alam and Husband 2006).

- For a fuller discussion see: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/bradford.htm

Manchester – In Pnina Werbner's anthropological trilogy of Pakistani Manchester (1990, 2002, 2003), the story is one of Panjabis from urban origins and their economic success. It is this that marks Manchester out from Kashmiri Oldham (Kalra, 2000) and other mill towns. So, while Pakistanis are again in the majority, they are much less so compared to Bradford. Like all British-Asian cities, Manchester is characterised through exoticising references to food, especially in terms of the Curry Mile along Wilmslow Road, now the focus of a novel by Zahid Hussain (2006). However, the character of this area has been transformed once again by recent migrants from the Middle East. Asian Manchester is also home to various South Asian heritage intellectuals, professionals, activists and artists. Big city freedom also makes it more open to 'mixed up' spaces that speak publicly of women's and queer British-Asian identifications.

- For a fuller discussion see: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/manchester.htm

Birmingham - Famed for its metal-bashing and manufacturing, the West Midlands is more ethnically diverse than the North of England. In Birmingham, Pakistanis and especially Kashmiris are once again the single largest minority ethnic grouping but there are very significant Indian and Caribbean populations. In his classic contributions to urban sociology during the 1960s and 1970s, 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 (cf Murphy 1987). While, beyond the Balti, representations of Pakistani Birmingham today are likely to be dominated by reference to Islamic politics, from experiences linking Sparkhill and Guantanamo Bay (Begg 2006) to Respect councillor, Salam Yaqoob), networks up and down the M40 form an essential part of the predominant London-Midlands orientation of Panjabi Sikhs in Britain, from the formation of the Indian Workers Association to the bhangra industry (Sharma et al, 1996; Dudrah, 2002, 2007).

- For a fuller discussion see: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/birmingham.htm

- *Leicester* – Relatively small in scale like Bradford, Leicester is actually the most religiously diverse city outside London. The largest minority ethnic groups are the Gujarati Hindus and African Asians. As twice migrants, any myth of return is far more complicated for the latter than others of South Asian heritage (Herbert 2008). An urban middle class, having arrived in Leicester with very little, the African Asians quickly recovered their position in business terms along ‘the Golden Mile’ of Belgrave Road where the largest Diwali celebrations outside India now take place with council support. Leicester is also notable for Asian women’s struggles over pay, conditions and racism on the factory floor and the community organising of the Belgrave Behano (Westwood, 1984, 1988 1990). Indeed, while the local council originally took steps to prevent Ugandan Asians from settling in the city (Singh and Martin, 2002), what may be one of the first minority white cities in Europe, has been lauded as a model for cohesion (Cantle 2001; cf Singh 2006).

- For a fuller discussion see: www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/leicester.htm

Some Cross-Cutting Themes:

Our research also identified a number of other important themes which cross-cut the writing of the individual cities. As our funding came from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, our concern was to examine how our subject areas had written about such matters in ways that complicated or added nuance to the more dominant perspectives of the social sciences and policy.

- *History* – there is a dearth of serious historical scholarship on South Asians in Britain. A few good academic surveys exist (e.g. Visram, Brown, Fisher et al.) but there is still a need to properly historicise the post-war, post-colonial period especially. In contrast, since the 1980s, oral history projects documenting the Indian Workers Association and Asian Youth Movements to bhangra have been collected with the support of state multiculturalism or the heritage industry. Sometimes innovative methods involving young people have been employed, while photographs and cartoons have been used for the purposes of dissemination. However, while urban history is well developed at Leicester University, for example, there is a risk of some archives going unused and in the study of Asian Britain there is a need for closer links between academic and oral histories. In collaboration with Inna Qureshi we have begun to forge a link between these two fields.

- For a fuller discussion see: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/brasian/assets/papers/WBAC007.pdf>

- *Literary / Cultural Production* – as well as famous novels such as Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, more attention should be paid to work such as that of Tariq Mehmood, Yunis Alam (Bradford) and Zahid Hussain (Manchester) which highlights the variety of British-Asian regional voices emerging and complex identifications they represent. The question of location also raises important issues about audiences and the power of the London-based publishing industry, as well as any claims to 'authenticity' by authors and the nature of their representations of the 'community'. Writing in languages other than English is also significant but academics are often unaware of its existence. The idea of writing or representing the British-Asian city also needs to be extended beyond the text to expressive cultures such as poetry, music and dance. See, for example, the work of Dudrah on bhangra in Birmingham and David on dance in British Hindu communities in Leicester and London.

- For a fuller discussion see: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/brasian/assets/papers/WBAC008.pdf>

- *Religion* - The network meetings highlighted the shift from race to religion in British-Asian identities, identifying various guises of 'religion' that emerge in the wider writing of cities. At Leicester, it was shown that it has been a vehicle for reinforcing and even sanctifying ethnic and other differences in terms of access to places of worship. Yet, religion is also a good way of organising unity across such differences vis-a-vis outsiders, not least in claims for public recognition. As the cases of Bradford and Manchester illustrated, local government has reinforced a tendency amongst South Asian communities in Britain to organise around religion since the 1980s, for example, in education. In Birmingham, it became clear that religion is also a powerful resource for moral and spiritual resistance to the excesses

of capitalism, although global networks of actors can take both quietist and more revolutionary forms. However, reflection on the Tower Hamlets event suggested that all of the above form a collection of dominant images about religion which obscure its more non-institutional, individual and popular forms, for example, in music.

- For a fuller discussion see: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/brasian/assets/papers/WBAC009.pdf>

- *Women's experiences* - The city events revealed discrepancies around the writing of British-Asian women's experiences. The gendered nature of the processes impacting upon migrants as they settle and establish relationships with society has often been underplayed. This has given rise to forms of writing from in the media, as well as from policy makers and academics, that attempt to 'redress the gender balance'. However, there is a tendency across these genres to essentialise women as passive victims of their culture who need rescuing by the progressive values inherent within western secular liberalism. The network examines how these discourses are manifest within different forms of women's writing, as well as writing about women, in terms of four themes: i) Migration, settlement and women's domestic reproductive role; ii) Political organising and activism around the intersection between race, gender, labour, religious relations; iii) Public recognition and the secular state, including the problematic of multiculturalism; iv) Trans-national cultural production/consumption.

- For a fuller discussion see: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/brasian/assets/papers/WBAC010.pdf>

Suggestions for Further Research:

- Writing the diaspora in British-Asian vernacular languages
- We also note that there is no definitive account of the representation of South Asians in the UK media, although of course there is a burgeoning literature on Muslims and Islamophobia.
- The writing of British-Asian London, e.g. Southall, with attention to the overarching impact of living in an undoubted global city characterised by 'superdiversity';
- A study of the idea of a distinctive British Pakistani Muslim North of England not least in terms of towns rather than cities;
- A thick ethnographic and oral historical spatial analysis of the dynamics of British-Asian urban spaces in the five cities:
 - i) particular Asianised streets such as Lumb Lane (Bradford), Soho Road (Birmingham), Brick Lane (London), Wilmslow Road (Manchester) and Belgrave Road (Leicester);
 - ii) melas as microcosms of local communities and their international connections

Further Information:

Dr Seán McLoughlin
Religious Studies
Tel: +44 113 3433643
Fax: +44 113 3433654
s.mcloughlin@leeds.ac.uk

Dr. William Gould
History
Tel: +44 113 3433612
Fax: +44 113 2342759
w.r.gould@leeds.ac.uk

Dr. Ananya Kabir
English
Tel: +44 113 3432693
Fax: +44 113 3434774
a.j.kabir@leeds.ac.uk

Dr. Emma Tomalin
Religious Studies
Tel: +44 113 3433658
Fax: +44 113 3433654
e.tomalin@leeds.ac.uk