From Diasporas to Multi-Locality: Writing British Asian Cities

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Introduction

A regional, ‘second city’ with global aspirations; a service-sector economy of which the heritage-trail is founded upon pride in an industrial past; a buoyant metropolis in an increasingly informational economy where 40 percent of the district is within the top 10 percent most deprived areas nationally: Birmingham is a city that is all too easily characterised in terms of paradoxes and contradictions. Such contradictions also find expression in the widely discrepant accounts of the British Asian presence in the city: the narration of Birmingham as a conduit for ethnic entrepreneurial success, for example, jostles uneasily with its portrayal as a racialised city in which examples of ‘success’ arise against a backdrop of structured exclusion from the formal labour market (Henry et al 2002; Ram et al, 2002). As this chapter seeks to show, however, at least some of the paradoxes that characterise the city generally and its British Asian communities specifically are a function of different authors’ perspectives, corresponding as much to the varied paradigms and narrative traditions within which authors write as to ‘objective’ or conjunctural contradictions. Emblematic of this is that Birmingham has been home to two distinct and not infrequently opposed academic ‘schools’, the Cultural Studies approach of Birmingham University’s erstwhile Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), and the Weberian urban sociology of John Rex and his collaborators, both of them profoundly influential in shaping the trajectory of research around ‘race’ and ethnicity in Birmingham, Britain and beyond. Drawing on recent developments in critical urban studies, and particularly Leonie Sandercock’s work on ‘alternative’ and ‘insurgent’ urban histories (1998a, 1998b, 2003), this chapter develops a spatial historiography of writing on ‘British Asian Birmingham’, interrogating the varied ways in which constructs of urban space and South Asian ethnicity have been articulated in different genres of writing – geographical, sociological, ethnographic and creative. The core premise of the chapter is that whilst each of these genres of writing is inevitably partial, a critical juxtaposition of the different notions of urban space upon which such writings rest enables a much fuller account to emerge of the complexity and ‘dynamic tension’ that characterise South Asian experiences in and of Birmingham in the post-war period.

Following an introductory section on the historical and demographic aspects of South Asian settlement and community construction in Birmingham, the chapter is divided into four principal sections, each examining the notions of space, both latent and manifest, that are brought to bear in
different literary genres. In the first section, I consider the promotional discourse of local government in Birmingham, and how this develops a selective semiotics of space as a vehicle for celebrating the city’s ‘successful’ accommodation of ‘difference’. I then move on to examine the urban sociological contribution, and in particular the seminal work of John Rex and his colleagues, as reflected in a series of major studies of ‘race relations’ in Birmingham written between the 1960s and 1980s (Rex and Moore, 1967; Rex, 1976; Rex and Tomlinson, 1979; Ratcliffe, 1981; Rex, 1988). Here, I consider the usefulness – as well as the excesses – of sociological theory-building around ethnicity, class and urban systems. In particular, I examine how attempts to recast the Chicago School ‘concentric zone’ model of the city within a Weberian class perspective enabled issues of ‘race’, economic stratification and urban location to be addressed relationally, but in ways that arguably invested too much importance in the ‘status defining’ role of the housing market. In the following section, I move on to consider work on British Asian ‘cultural production’ in Birmingham, straddling the period from the late 1970s to the present, during which Birmingham’s economy has undergone major economic restructuring. In this section, I explore the ways in which specific authors have laid differential stresses on the constraining and enabling potential of the ‘new’ Birmingham economy for South Asian and other minority groups, linking this to a discussion of literature on emerging ‘hybrid’ cultural forms, such as Dudrah’s recent work on bhangra (2002; 2007). In the final section of the chapter, I review the scope for developing ‘alternative histories’ and accounts of the South Asian presence in Birmingham – including archive materials and creative writing - which might encompass ‘moments’ that have so far been muted or eclipsed in existing accounts. By way of conclusion, I return to the core premise of the chapter by making a case for the reflexive engagement with such materials, which are by definition not less selective or than materials used in extant accounts.

1. The South Asian Presence in Birmingham: The Demographic Context

Demographically no less than socially and culturally, Birmingham’s various South Asian groups constitute an increasingly significant component of the local population. Even allowing for the age of the data, at the time of the 2001 Census, individuals in Birmingham who identified themselves as either ‘Asian’ or ‘Asian British’ constituted slightly less than a fifth of a local population of approximately 1 million (see table 1). Within the broad-brush ‘ethno-national’ groupings that constitute this category, the largest are the Pakistanis, who alone make up 10 percent of the Birmingham population, followed by Indians (5.7 percent), Bangladeshis (2.1 percent) and ‘Other Asians’ (1 percent). Moreover, on account of the youthfulness of these groups, their relative share of
the population can be expected to grow substantially over the coming decades (see O’Toole and Gale, forthcoming).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>687,422</td>
<td>70.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Ethnicity</td>
<td>27,967</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Asian British</td>
<td>190,661</td>
<td>19.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>55,742</td>
<td>5.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>104,014</td>
<td>10.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>20,828</td>
<td>2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Asian</td>
<td>10,077</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or Black British</td>
<td>59,836</td>
<td>6.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese or Other Ethnic Group</td>
<td>11,208</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>5,098</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Ethnic Group</td>
<td>6,110</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Ethnic origins of the Birmingham population, (Source: 2001 Census)

Importantly, the 2001 Census – which asked a question on religion for the first time since 1851 – also showed the South Asian presence in Birmingham to religiously as well as ethnically heterogeneous (see table 2). Thus, the Census revealed there to be 140,033 Muslims, 28,592 Sikhs and 19,358 Hindus. Respectively, members of these religions account for 14.3 per cent, 2.9 per cent and 2.0 per cent of the local population, and the majority of them are of South Asian heritage. Hindus and Sikhs are overwhelmingly of Indian ethnicity: 94 per cent of Hindus and 93 per cent of Sikhs identified themselves as being of Indian ethnic origin. Conversely, Hindus and Sikhs account for 33 per cent and 48 per cent respectively of the city’s Indian ethnic population. The linkage between religion and ethnicity is less marked for Muslims than for either Sikhs or Hindus. Nevertheless, the large majority of those identifying as Muslims in Birmingham were also of South Asian heritage, with Pakistanis accounting for 70 per cent, Bangladeshis 14 per cent and Indians four per cent of the combined Muslim total. Conversely, 94 per cent of Pakistanis and 93 per cent of Bangladeshis identified themselves as Muslims.
Table 2: Religious affiliation of South Asians in Birmingham (Source: 2001 Census)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Jewish</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Sikh</th>
<th>Any other religion</th>
<th>No religion</th>
<th>Religion not stated</th>
<th>All People</th>
<th>Base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Asian</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>67.4</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>190,661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>55,742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>93.7</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>104,014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bang’deshi</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>92.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>20,828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Asian</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>10,077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Base</td>
<td>2,279</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>18,976</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>128,560</td>
<td>28,013</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>1,214</td>
<td>10,793</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>190,661</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note that the historical roots of the South Asian presence in Birmingham are of considerably longer standing than popular perceptions often tend to allow for. As with other cities in the UK, links between Birmingham and the Indian sub-continent were forged under the aegis of empire, with the city constituting a destination for students and doctors from the late 19th century onwards (Visram, 1986). By 1930, the largest cohort of overseas students in Britain were from India, and whilst the majority of them congregated in London, Cambridge and Oxford, there were nevertheless significant numbers who attended major ‘provincial’ universities, including Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds (Visram, 1986). Coming from a very different point on the social scale, in the years prior to the Second World War, Birmingham also became a destination for seamen (‘lascars’) as they moved inwards from the port cities – principally Cardiff – where they had jumped ship (Visram, 1986: 54-74). According to Visram’s calculation, on the eve of the war, the Indian population in Birmingham had stood at approximately 100, of whom a fifth were students and doctors; by the end of the war, the number had increased to approximately 1,000, largely through the arrival of the former seamen, who gained employment in factories whose production expanded to meet war-time needs (Visram, 1986: 191-2; Dahya, 1974: 95-6).

In the post-war period, the development of South Asian communities in Birmingham followed a similar trajectory as in other regions of the UK, beginning with processes of chain-migration that
were intimately linked to Britain’s post-war economic reconstruction (see especially Aurora 1967, Desai 1963, and Dahya 1974 for contemporaneous accounts of the migration and settlement process; see also Ballard 1994a for a national overview). Settling in the inner-city district of Balsall Heath, those who settled in the city during the war years were the ‘frontiersmen’ (Aurora, 1967), serving as a bridgehead for the subsequent development of ethnic enclaves as they sponsored kinsmen and fellow villagers to arrive in the city for the purposes of work (Dahya, 1974: 96). Of the migrants from Pakistan, many were from Mirpur in Azad Kashmir and the Chhach District (formerly known as Cambellpur), whilst those from former East Pakistan (subsequently Bangladesh) were predominantly from Sylhet (Rex and Moore, 1967: 115-6; Ballard, 1994: 20). Of the Indians, the majority were Punjabis, who came to the city largely from the Jullunder district of the Punjab, and were later joined by those coming via the former British colonies in East Africa (Rex and Moore, 1967: 130-1). A smaller number were Gujaratis, who likewise came both directly from Gujarat (principally the Surat and Charottar districts) and later, from East Africa (Rex and Moore, 1967: 130: Desai, 1963: 13). Of the larger Punjabi group, the majority were Sikhs, which ultimately accounts for the differences in size of the Hindu and Sikh proportions of Birmingham’s Indian population, as reflected in the 2001 Census returns: as shown in table 2, Sikhs make up approximately half the Indian ethnic group (47.9 percent) whilst Hindus make up slightly less than a third (32.7 percent).

As discussed in detail in the ensuing section, during the early phase of chain-migration, workers had mostly lived in all-male lodging houses, often in very cramped conditions, as a means to save earnings that could be remitted to families at home (Rex and Moore, 1967: 133-146). However, an important shift occurred in patterns of South Asian migration to, and settlement in, Britain with the passage of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, affecting Birmingham no less than other cities in the UK (see Phillips, 1981 for Leicester). In an ironic subversion of its own aim, the impact of the Act was to generate fresh waves of in-migration, as economic migrants from Britain’s former colonies clamoured to enter the country before the mooted legislation became operative (Spencer, 1997: 129). Workers already resident in the UK stayed on, and encouraged kinsmen, fellow villagers and families to join them (see Helweg, 1979 for a detailed account of this process in Southall). In Birmingham, the consequence of this surge of immigration was a rapid increase in the size of the ‘New Commonwealth’ population of the city, from 28,169 in 1961 to 49,870 in 1966 (Jones, 1970: 202).¹ Lodging houses were given up in favour of large, nineteenth-century semi-detached housing that was more suited to accommodating families. In Birmingham, such houses were located in large

¹ This statistical impression was made possible by an inter-censal 10 per cent sample census conducted by the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS), now the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in 1966.
number in the Balsall Heath, Edgbaston, Small Heath and Aston areas of the city, where the migrants had already begun to settle (Desai, 1963: 24-5). It is, however, important not to over-generalise across different South Asian origins groups about the rate at which this process of family reunification took place: for Pakistanis (who were predominantly Muslims), for instance, the movement from male-oriented migration to family reunification and settlement was more protracted than for Indians (that majority of whom were Hindus and Sikhs). This is clearly reflected in the different gender ratios of South Asian migrants to Birmingham as recorded in the 1971 Census (see table 3), with a ratio of 0.8 women to men for the Indian population, as compared with 0.3 for the Pakistani population (see also figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of birth</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Ratio (Females to Males)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>398,778</td>
<td>429,703</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>6,096</td>
<td>5,409</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>8,555</td>
<td>8,098</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>6,232</td>
<td>5,190</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Republic</td>
<td>23,301</td>
<td>21,018</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Commonwealth</td>
<td>663</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Commonwealth</td>
<td>40,338</td>
<td>26,884</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>2,714</td>
<td>2,115</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America</td>
<td>12,908</td>
<td>12,016</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceylon</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>10,002</td>
<td>7,613</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>13,268</td>
<td>4,017</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Far East</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other NC</td>
<td>751</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Europe</td>
<td>3,557</td>
<td>3,681</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (At sea, etc.)</td>
<td>4,621</td>
<td>3,266</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>492,141</td>
<td>503,880</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Country of Birth of Residents by gender in Birmingham (Source: 1971 Census)
Figure 1: Males and females as percentages of ‘New Commonwealth and Pakistan’ immigrant groups in Birmingham (Source: 1971 Census)

For the purposes of this chapter, a crucial observation made by these early commentators on Birmingham (Desai, 1963; Dahya, 1974; Jones, 1970), is that by the late 1950s and early 1960s, immigrants from the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbean Islands and Yemen had already begun to settle in residential clusters, in a discernable band around the city’s inner core. Thus, Dahya (1974: 96) remarked that whilst most of the various groups had initially resided in Balsall Heath (formerly in Deritend ward, and subsequently in Sparkbrook) to the southeast of the city centre, by 1956, they had ‘already sorted themselves out on the basis of national origins and ethnicity’. Pakistanis had begun to settle in Moseley, Sparkbrook, Small Heath and Aston, Jat Sikhs in Sparkbrook, as well as the towns of Wolverhampton and Smethwick adjacent to the city’s western boundary, Ramgarhia Sikhs to the south of the primary Balsall Heath area, and Yemenis in Balsall Heath and Moseley. Desai (1963: 22-3) likewise noted this pattern, commenting that ‘there is no uniform spread of coloured [sic] immigrants over these [inner-city] districts, but a tendency for the various groups of immigrants to gravitate to specific areas.’ In addition, Desai (1963: 23) noted that immigrants of Gujarati origin had settled in Aston to the north of the city centre, and Edgbaston to the south. As news reports and secondary academic accounts from the 1960s and 1970s indicate, this process of
residential clustering was repeatedly contested and successively politicised, with the City Council making a series of concerted attempts to fragment the emerging enclaves through policies of residential dispersal (see e.g. ‘City race row over housing policy’, *The Guardian* 23 October 1975 and ‘Ghetto challenge to Home Office’, *The Sunday Times*, 26 October 1975; see also Rex and Moore, 1967; and Flett, Henderson and Brown, 1979).

2. **South Asians in Birmingham and Governmental Discourses of Multiculturalism**

The reason for dwelling on the demographic patterns discussed in the preceding section is that they are not of mere academic, but also of considerable social and political significance, lying at the root of much reflection, commentary and writing on South Asians in Birmingham from the 1960s down to the present time. Indeed, at the level of governmental discourse the ethnic composition of the city has come to be represented as a highly-prized asset, with social and cultural ‘diversity’ being seen to contribute to the vitality of the city’s putative place within the contemporary global order (Henry et al. 2002). For example, the notion that Birmingham is a ‘culturally diverse’ city of ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’ was at the core of the City Council’s failed bid to make Birmingham the European Capital of Culture in 2008. More recently, the City Council, again under the stewardship of Councillor Whitby, has embarked on ambitious plans to develop business links between the emerging South Asian powers of India and Pakistan, not least because of the ‘long-standing connections’ and ‘family ties’ that link these countries to Birmingham (Councillor Whitby, cited by the *Urban Land Institute*, 21 June 2006). Corresponding to this perceived role, the Council's planning and development strategy for the city incorporates proposals that actively endorse the celebration of cultural difference through the built environment. For instance, in the City Development Plan, the chapter on Sparkbrook and Small Heath wards (where Pakistani Muslims constitute a large proportion of the local population) states that ‘throughout the Sparkbrook and Sparkhill areas, there are concentrations of specialist shops and restaurants in local centres’, suggesting that ‘the area as a whole has potential for development as a tourist attraction’ (Birmingham City Council, 2001: 401). In a similar vein, the Council recently made use of a grant from the European Development Fund to redevelop the Ladypool Road area of Balsall Heath, which has become renowned for the large number of Balti houses it hosts (see section 4 below). The grant was used to commission bollards and street furniture in a ‘Mughal’ style, thus making an ‘attraction’ of the area in which the

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restaurants are clustered. These and a variety of related projects are indicative of the City Council’s commitment to policies of ‘multiculturalism’ that refer to ethnically concentrated urban spaces and surrounding built environment as vehicles for the celebration of ‘cultural difference’. This governmental strategy, in which the cultural characteristics of built environments are articulated to policies of urban and economic development, has been critically examined by urban sociologists in other contexts, giving rise to the notion of the ‘symbolic economy’ (see Zukin, 1995; Scott, 2000). One important aspect of this promotion of the ‘multicultural built environment’ is the discursive and aesthetic prominence given to religious architecture, and particularly that of Muslim groups. As discussed in more detail elsewhere (Gale, 2004, 2005), numerous planning decisions over purpose-built mosques in Birmingham have been linked directly to an increasing concern to promote the image of city as a model of successful urban multiculturalism. Thus, two of the biggest mosques in the city, the Birmingham Central Mosque in Highgate and the Dar ul-Uloom Islamia have received favourable treatment in planning decision-making, on account of their distinctive Islamic styles and their prominence to major arterial roads leading in and out of the inner-city (Gale, 2004; see also Gale, 2008). By articulating one specific set of meanings, such spatial celebration overlooks or suppresses acknowledgement of the entrenched patterns of inequality on the one hand, and richly dense social and cultural networks on the other, that are rather more significant to the ways in which such spaces are lived and experienced. The ensuing sections attempt to tease out some of this social complexity as reflected in different writings on South Asians in Birmingham spanning the era of mass immigration and settlement in the 1960s down to the present.

3. **Community, Class and Conflict – The Sociological Contribution and its Critics**

The residential patterning discussed in the preceding section formed the backdrop to a precondition for a series of social geographical studies, conducted between the early and mid-1970s, of ‘racial’ segregation, founded upon a crude Black-White dualism, at the core of which was a construction of segregation as a ‘problem’ to be addressed through social policy instruments (Jones, 1970, 1976; Woods, 1979). More significant, however, were the earlier accounts of South Asian urban experiences in the classic sociological studies of John Rex and his collaborators, beginning with *Race Community and Conflict: A Study of Sparkbrook* (with Robert Moore) in 1967, followed-up by *Colonial Immigrants in a British City* (with Sally Tomlinson) in 1979. From a disciplinary perspective, the importance of these studies lay in their simultaneous contribution to the fields of urban...
sociology and ‘race relations’, furnishing insights of both theoretical and empirical significance. The 1967 study in particular was remarkable for its novel integration of the early Chicago School model of city growth with Weberian class analysis. Specifically, Rex and Moore took on the understanding, developed by Ernest Burgess and Robert Park (1967 [1925]), that the city constituted a system with a discernible social-spatial structure, most apparent in its differentiation into identifiable residential zones (Rex and Moore, 1967: 7-9; 272-285). Whilst the classic Burgess model of the city drew attention to the concentric configuration of these zones (1967: 47-62), for Rex and Moore, the more significant point was that each zone – apparently, at least – became the preserve of particular ‘sub-communities’. Rex and Moore explicitly set out to correct for the internal contradictions of the Burgess model, which appeared to draw attention to competition for land between ‘sub-communities’ on the one hand and the ‘self-sufficiency’ and autonomy of such communities on the other. In contrast, and consistently with their Weberian inclinations, Rex and Moore placed greater stress on the conflict between groups concentrated in different urban zones, which, in playing out in the housing market, led to the emergence of distinct class/status groups, defined by the authors as ‘housing classes’ (1967: 6, 39, 272-285).

The significance of these arguments from our point of view is that migrant groups including South Asians were seen as especially disadvantaged in this struggle, on account of their low pay, their ethnicity and the recentness of their arrival in Birmingham. The combined result of these three factors was that migrants were constrained to occupy the least desirable housing-type in the most disfavoured areas of the city, namely the lodging-houses located in the ‘transition zones’ surrounding the central business district. The recentness of migrants’ arrival in the city was accorded particular significance in Rex and Moore’s account, given that the City Council had implemented a points-based allocation system for public housing, which rested on a five-year residency rule. Without apparently being discriminatory in its design, this rule was highly discriminatory in its effect, disbaring migrants from access to publicly-administered housing stock, as Rex and Moore explain:

‘This we found to be the crux of the immigrant housing problem in Birmingham. Whereas Birmingham people could go on to the Housing Register at any time and when they had acquired enough points obtain a council house, all immigrants, whether white or black, had a five-year waiting period before they could begin to qualify. Necessarily, therefore, there had to be some other form of housing for the large number of people for whom the Council

refused to accept responsibility. This ‘other form of housing’ was provided by the lodging-houses in the so-called twilight zones of the city.’

(Rex and Moore, 1967: 24)

These themes are developed further in Rex’s later work on Birmingham, Colonial Immigrants in a British City, which took the ward of Handsworth to the north west of the city centre as its focal point (Rex and Tomlinson, 1979). The housing class thesis was maintained but received different treatment in the later work, given the authors’ acknowledgement of the earlier work’s over-emphasis on the housing market (Rex and Tomlinson, 1979: 127). Hence, Colonial Immigrants in a British City assumes a much wider remit in its examination of the politics of community, taking into consideration the over-laps between different areas of class and ethnic conflict, with the issue of housing now set alongside those of education and the workplace. Conceptually, however, the interlocking nature of these various domains of struggle was approached in essentially the same way: emphasis was laid on the city as an encompassing urban system, with the lack of equity in the allocation of resources within this system being attributable to the unequal terms on which people of different ethnic and ipso facto class origins were forced to compete.

One should not of course seek to lessen the impression, strongly conveyed in both Rex and Moore’s (1967) and Rex and Tomlinson’s (1979) accounts, of the intense and protean forms of racial discrimination that were woven into Birmingham’s social infrastructure in this period. Nonetheless, it is clear from other contemporary accounts of the experiences of migrants to the city that these authors arguably overlooked the differential aspirations and culturally mediated housing choices of different groups of migrants. Crucially, this issue forms an important dimension of the early work on South Asian experiences in Birmingham and elsewhere, most notably in the oft-cited work social anthropological of Badr Dahya (1974) on Pakistanis in Bradford and Birmingham. Indeed, whilst housing is no less a keystone issue in Dahya’s account, the significance he attributes to it as a vehicle for understanding ‘the nature of Pakistani ethnicity’ in British industrial cities is more or less the obverse of that found in the work of Rex and his collaborators. For Dahya, the primary consideration was not whether and to what extent Pakistanis were constrained to operate within the narrow contours of a given urban system, but of how housing functioned as a resource that could be mobilised within the networks of reciprocity in which Pakistani migrants were located (Dahya, 1974: 101-2). The key factor here is that these networks were ‘bounded’ in terms of kinship and belonging rather than place, with multi-occupancy housing serving as a functional node in a chain of relationships stretching between Britain and the sub-continent: buying an inexpensive house
through mutual aid and recouping the cost through rent, or occupying a cheap room in a lodging-house for a fixed period of work helped minimise living expenses in Britain, thus maximising in turn the proportion of earnings that could be remitted home (Dahya, 1974: 100). For Dahya, this resulted from the fact that – contra the Weberianism of John Rex – the home setting in South Asia rather than the urban housing market of Birmingham or any other British city, constituted the true locus of status definition:

‘[F]rom the immigrant’s point of view, the ‘significant others’ are his kinsmen and fellow-villagers back home who will recognize his achieved status and he [sic] accordingly seeks their esteem and approbation [...] In keeping with their myth of return, the immigrants do not regard the house in Britain as a ‘home’ but as a short-term expediency related to a particular goal or goals. It cannot be overemphasised that the immigrants came to Britain with the firm intention of earning and saving money and eventually returning to their homeland.’

(Dahya, 1974: 98-9)

Ultimately perhaps, and as the period these accounts allude to recedes from view, the apparent tension between Dahya’s and Rex’s analyses turns on differences of emphasis rather than outright contradiction. Nevertheless, what both of these accounts share, along with those of geographers referred to at the beginning of this sub-chapter, is their degree of professional distance from the processes they describe, with only a marginal sense being conveyed of how such processes might be reflected on and articulated by those who were their primary participants. Recently, however, housing experiences from this period were vividly recalled as part of oral history project on first generation Bangladeshi settlers in Birmingham, which revealed in less reified form how and by whom houses were bought and occupied, and how this stood in relation to working patterns and conditions:

‘My uncle and Abdul Jabber [a family friend] combined to pay £900 cash for a house in Hay Mills. It had two bedrooms, one reception, a dining room and like most of our houses, an outside toilet and no bathroom. The house was furnished with second-hand furniture and we moved in. ‘We’ were ten of us all from the same neighbourhood in Sylhet except from one man from West Pakistan. Every so often one or two new men came from Sylhet and within a week or so got jobs and stayed on. Our two bedrooms were not enough so we turned the reception into a bedroom and three men slept there in single beds. Often while we were working nights, people arrived and slept in our beds. Next morning we came in and
found someone in our beds. They could be one of our friends, neighbours or relatives or a complete stranger from home.’

(Bangladeshi migrant to Birmingham, cited in Choudhury and Drake, 2001)

Indeed, by drawing on other forms of writing and reflection on Birmingham than the sociological, quite different points of view relative to the same city spaces begin to emerge. To give one remarkable example, in an interview conducted as part of the Birmingham Black Oral History Project (discussed in detail below), a South Asian male with a life-time’s experience of working for an Asian community resource centre based in Handsworth, criticised directly the way in which the area had tended to be constructed in sociological and other ‘outsider’ accounts. In particular, he stressed how these constructions diverge from the perspectives of those living and working amongst the inhabitants of the area:

‘I suppose over the 20 years, because I have been on the inside I haven’t really noticed the changes, they have been gradual and incremental. It’s people from outside who see Handsworth changing very rapidly, but for me it has been an evolution. I remember very distinctly when the disturbances [in the summer of 1985] took place in Handsworth [...] I had phone calls from India, from Pakistan, from America, from concerned relatives and friends who said ‘are you in the middle of all these troubles? What’s happening to you? Is Handsworth going up in smoke?’ Now, this was typical of the attitude of some of the people who lived far away from Handsworth, who only saw Handsworth as a trouble spot, much researched and documented by sociologists, over-policed with money pouring into it from Home Office coffers and so on [...] [W]hen you come into Handsworth you don’t really see black people and policemen fighting with each other at every street corner. You don’t see drug dealing in every single café in the area. You don’t see racial conflict and strife on almost every little piece of land or school playground but you do actually see in fact quite the opposite.’

Whilst this account draws its force from the specificity of the interviewee’s local experience, its resonance is at the same time wide-reaching, and invites more general reflection on the relation of sociological or other institutional writings and practices to their ‘objects’.
4. **Birmingham as a Site of South Asian Cultural Production**

Regardless of the epistemological issues one may have with the premises of the ‘canonical’ sociological contributions addressed above, it is also the case that the debates they engage over the intersection between ethnicity and social stratification are historically situated. In *Race, Community and Conflict*, the industrial character of Birmingham’s economic infrastructure forms an unquestioned backdrop to a fundamentally class-based analysis. A decade later, *Colonial Immigrants in a British City* differed from the earlier work with its perspicacious assessment of how the actual and anticipated dismantling of industrial activity in Birmingham would disproportionately affect South Asian and African Caribbean members of the local workforce (Rex and Tomlinson, 1979: 98-126). Yet even here, the discussion was addressed to the reconfiguration of existing industrial social relations. Ultimately, the processes of restructuring that Rex and Tomlinson had begun to note at the end of the 1970s would continue unabated until the late 1980s, to the extent that between 1971 and 1987, 191,000 jobs had been lost in Birmingham, of which 150,000 (78.5 per cent) were in the manufacturing sector (Henry et al., 2002: 117).

From the late 1980s, this process of restructuring began to consolidate, with the city recovering much of its former economic buoyancy through service sector development. This was in part a result of initiatives undertaken or promoted by the City Council, which actively fostered wider processes of entrepreneurial investment in this period. As Henry et al. note, between 1986 and 1992, Birmingham City Council invested an estimated £276 million in a series of commercial and entertainment schemes that would serve to revivify the Birmingham economy (Henry et al., 2002: 117). These schemes included the International Convention Centre (ICC) and adjacent Symphony Hall, the National Exhibition Centre (NEC) on the outskirts of the city, ‘Brindley Place’ (otherwise known as the canal-side development), which now hosts a series of clubs, pubs, restaurants and luxury apartments, and the recently re-constructed ‘Bull Ring’ shopping complex (Henry et al., 2002: 117). Contrasts in Birmingham’s employment characteristics at different phases of the city’s post-war history encapsulate the profundity of the change: at the time of the 1951 Census, as post-war reconstruction was beginning to get underway, 64 percent of the workforce was employed in the manufacturing or manufacturing-related sectors, and only 35 percent in the service sector (Sutcliffe and Smith, 1974). According to current employment statistics however, the vast majority of the
working population – 85 percent – are now employed in the service sector, and a mere 15 percent in either the agricultural, manufacturing, or construction sectors (Office for National Statistics, 2007). A

These changes in the economy and employment structure of the city have given a considerable boon to research on the theme of entrepreneurship and cultural production among South Asian and other minority groups in Birmingham, reflecting at the same time a more generic shift in the terrain of debate from workplace relations to consumption patterns in the shaping of social identities (Jenkins, 2008). One formulation of this theme appears in the work of McEwan et al. (2005), who discuss the production of ‘Asian’ food products, the ‘balti’ restaurant sector and the bhangra music industry, as instances of economic globalization ‘from below’. By drawing on the trans-national networks and practices of city dwellers rather than governments and corporations, such activities are construed in this account as a demonstration of the agency of South Asians and members of other minority groups in producing cosmopolitan, trans-national city spaces (McEwan et al. 2005: 916). One of the cases discussed by the authors is the large, family-run wholesale and grocery firm ‘East End Foods’, whose success is seen to lie in its importation and packaging of foodstuffs from the subcontinent, and in successively carving out global export markets. In 2004, their expansionary success won them the approbation of then Minister for Europe, Dennis McShane. In terms that are redolent of the discursive constructions placed on ‘multiculturalism’ by local government officials discussed in section one, McShane observed that ‘innovators like East End Foods are carving niches for themselves in the European Single Market’, expressing his ‘delight’ at how the company was ‘exporting some British diversity to the continent’ (cited in McEwan et al. 2005: 923).

The agential aspects of such entrepreneurial activity are rightly emphasised in McEwan et al’s work, which seeks to articulate previously under-explored dimensions of South Asian economic practices in British urban settings. Here again, however, this interpretation is in tension with other accounts of South Asian entrepreneurship in Birmingham, which draw rather more attention to the constrained and vulnerable nature of this form of cultural production. In their work on the restaurant sector of Birmingham’s ‘Balti Quarter’, for example, Ram et al. (2002) reveal some of the ways in which consumer expectations both fuel and frustrate restaurant success. This stems from the fact that whilst the food is very largely a British Asian creation fusing various elements of sub-continental cuisine, the basis on which ‘Indian’ (although in Birmingham, predominantly Mirpuri) restaurants attract their customers is by tapping into exoticised associations that form part of a more general cultural legacy of empire:

‘Seen in this light, the entire ‘Indian’ restaurant industry in Britain and elsewhere is based on a wholly inauthentic cuisine, a consequence of the appropriation and adulteration of an ancient cultural heritage. Yet from the restaurateur’s point of view, concerned with everyday practical commerce rather than abstract questions of cultural history, there is a certain empowerment to be derived from the welter of illusions and delusions under which white English customers labour. Undoubtedly the very fact that most native white Britons are unable to distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ South Asian food imparts an air of mystery to the eating out experience.’

(Ram et al. 2002: 29)

Quite aside from the cultural politics implicit in this reconstitution of colonial imaginaries, the problem with harnessing an ‘air of mystery’ as the modus operandi of economic activity is that this form of subjective allure may wax and wane unpredictably, rendering it difficult for restaurants to guarantee regular custom, and hence company profitability (Ram et al. 29). Ram et al. (2002) suggest that the problem of customer caprice is further compounded by a range of other market considerations that serve to heighten the vulnerability of the sector. Not the least of these is the level of competition operating within the sector itself, which is intensified through the promotional activity of the City Council (see section 2 above): an unintended consequence of making a tourist trail of the ‘Balti Quarter’ has been to generate ever increasing numbers of new market entrants, tipping the balance unfavourably between supply and demand as more and more restaurants vie for the attentions of fickle consumers (Ram et al. 2002; 29). More generally, Ram and his colleagues emphasise the need to keep in mind the relation between ‘ethnic entrepreneurship’ and a city’s wider labour market, in the sense that entrepreneurial activity and apparent ‘success’ may in fact emerge from experiences of formal labour market exclusion (Ram et al. 2002).

Whilst the primary clientele of Birmingham’s balti restaurants may be non-South Asians, the case is dramatically different with ‘British bhangra’, a form of British Asian cultural production for which Birmingham has likewise been hugely significant (Dudrah, 2007: 11). Indeed, until relatively recently, bhangra music in Britain had been more or less ignored in academic and wider mainstream discourses, despite its importance as a constitutive element within British Asian youth identities (Sharma, 1996; Dudrah, 2002). Since the late 1980s, however, bhangra has been the focus of mounting interest within debates over the changing morphology of diasporic identity formation in Britain, as the ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak, 1990) of anti-racist ‘black politics’ has given ground to the formation of ‘new ethnicities’ in which an aesthetics of cultural interchange and hybridity has
become increasingly prominent (Hall, 1986). The importance of bhangra in this context stems from
the way it succeeds in fusing different stylistic and performative elements within a framework
deriving from Punjabi music and dance traditions (Haq, 1996). The key elements of the ‘traditional’
form of the music remain distinctively to the fore, with songs in Punjabi lyrics being sung to the
accompaniment of dance rhythms played on a dhol (a double-ended drum) and performed at
festivals and social gatherings (Dudrah, 2007). However, in its British setting, whilst also developing
within its own contours, bhangra has intersected syncretically with a wide range of other musical
genres, including reggae, R’n’B and Hip-Hop, to the extent that it ultimately defies the strictures of
‘established musical classification’ (Sharma, 1996).

Much of what has been written to date on bhangra is devoted to interpreting the wider significance
of this stylistic hybridity (Baumann, 1990; Haq, 1996; Sharma, 1996; Sharma et al., 1996), but in ways
that tend to portray it as a decontextualised cultural artefact. In contrast, Rajinder Dudrah’s recent
work on bhangra in Birmingham (Dudrah, 2002; 2007) interrogates directly rather than
metaphorically the links between bhangra as music and wider processes of British Asian identity
construction. He achieves this by engaging simultaneously with artistic practice (including song lyrics
and live performance), ‘industry’ activity (including the growth of studios and distribution
companies) and importantly, audience participation (in relation to both the connotations of the
lyrics and attendance at live events). Indeed, engagement with the audience’s response is a
particular innovation of Dudrah’s work, in that he reveals by this how young British Asians don’t only
‘consume’ but critically interpret the music, valorising the cultural politics articulated in some songs
(such as Dhol Tax by the Birmingham-based group Achanak), yet disavowing the sexism and caste
chauvinism latent in others (Dudrah, 2002: 372-377). In this way, Dudrah’s account of bhangra is
dynamic, neither reducing songs to ‘texts’ nor simplistically reading their mixed musical setting as an
allegory of ‘cultural exchange at the margins’ — his chief complaint in relation to some earlier authors
(e.g. Baumann, 1990; and Bannerji, 1988). Above all, Dudrah shows how bhangra is as remarkable
for its social as its aesthetic qualities, whereby oft-repeated references in the lyrics to Soho Road
and other symbolically ‘BrAsian’ sites within Birmingham are the corollary of the life the music takes
on as recordings or performances, whether in the homes, the streets or the venues of which these
sites are comprised (Dudrah, 2002: 376-378).
5. **Archives and ‘Alternative Histories’**

Up to this point, the themes addressed in this chapter have been approached with as great an emphasis on historiography as on history, in recognition of the fact that each sample or genre of writing bares the hallmarks and traces of its institutional inscription. Whether our concern has been with media, governmental or academic commentary – discursive domains which in practice are by no means discrete – it is clear that the partiality of what gets written corresponds to the way such writings are *under*written by their paradigmatic location. Whilst this is undeniably the case with any form of writing or documentation, the pragmatic question nonetheless begs what alternative sources might be drawn on, if only to illuminate some of the penumbral regions left by existing accounts.

In this regard, there have recently been initiatives in Birmingham, largely through collaborations between Birmingham City Council, academics and a variety of third sector organisations, to develop substantial archives – written, oral and photographic – of different communal presences and histories in the city in the post-war period. One of these, already drawn on in this chapter, is the Birmingham Black Oral History Project, which was conducted between 1990 and 1992 with the aim to ‘collect, preserve and disseminate the spoken history of Birmingham’s black population.’ The project involved a series of in-depth interviews with 25 first generation Asian and African Caribbean migrants to Birmingham. The archive of the project, now hosted by the University of Birmingham, constitutes an important source of information respondents’ initial experiences of settlement, their exposure to racism in the workplace and their encounters with social, cultural and religious differences of various kinds.

A more recent initiative was the ‘Connecting Histories Project’, led by Birmingham City Council’s Birmingham Archives and Heritage Service and a team of academics from the Universities of Birmingham and Warwick between 2005 and 2007. Moving beyond the remit of primary and secondary data collection of earlier archive projects, the Connecting Histories team sought to ‘release the potential’ of existing archives by disseminating their coverage more widely and accessibly, which included the production of detailed on-line resources and archive essays on themes that were hitherto under-explored. An important example is their work on the Indian Worker’s Association (IWA), a branch of which opened as the Shaheed Udham Singh Welfare Centre

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6 The aims and objectives of the project are set out in detail on the project website, [http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/project.asp](http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/project.asp), accessed 26 May 2009.
on Soho Road in the late 1970s. Since the foundation of its first branch in Coventry in the 1930s, which was swiftly followed by the opening of branches in London, Birmingham/Smethwick, Bradford and Huddersfield, the IWA has been an enormously important facet of the history of Indian (male) migrant workers’ experiences in Britain. As the Connecting Histories archives make clear, this is not only because of the IWA’s on-going struggle for equal and fair treatment of its membership in the workforce, but for its extensive involvement in mobilisations for racial and social justice more generally. As the collated correspondence of the leadership of the Birmingham branch of the IWA makes clear, these activities were not simply local in orientation, but also had important national and international ramifications. In this regard, it is surprising the extent to which the IWA is overlooked in the sociological studies discussed above: the organisation is not discussed in Rex and Moore’s (1967) Sparkbrook study, and receives on cursory treatment in Rex and Tomlinson’s (1979) work on Handsworth (267-8 and passim).

If archive resources offer one source of material from which a thickened description of British Asian experiences of Birmingham might emerge, quite different perspectives on these experiences arise from the work of creative writers, whose accounts shift the authorial register radically from academic objectivity and ‘explanation’ to intimate encounter and negotiation. Here, the concern with ‘ethnic conflict’ and its contested intersection with processes of class formation cedes its over-privileged place to infinitely more complex sets of emotional entanglement that emerge from the sensuousness of lived experience. Compelling examples of writing in this vein are included in two key collections of stories: the first of these, Whispers in the Walls, edited by Leone Ross and Yvonne Brissett (2001), was published with explicit intention to showcase new writings by Birmingham-based Black and South Asian writers; the second, Mango Shake, edited by Debjani Chatterjee (2006), is a more eclectic mix of stories by four regionally based authors, three of them second generation British Asian men whose stories all reflect different aspects of on their experiences of Birmingham. Taken together, both collections give voice to hushed nuances of perception and experience that are an endemic, if frequently overlooked, feature of the city’s ‘urban and domestic geography’ (Ross and Brissett, 2001: 9).

A recurrent theme of the stories by Asian contributors to Whispers in the Walls is how the relations between men and women are subtly altered – practically and perceptually – in response to the surrounding British urban context. In ‘One Last Time’, a story about an ‘illicit’ relationship between a young man and woman of different religious backgrounds, Kavita Bhanot subtly interlaces

bittersweet memory with tortured daydream to portray how the young woman, on receipt of an invitation to her former lover’s wedding, must come to terms with the end of their relationship. Her inner struggle over the urge to see him again, and her fear of censure on entering the marriage hall in order to do so, is emotionally poignant. It is made all the more so, however, in a context where the man has severed his relations with the woman to fulfil a parental expectation that he would marry someone of his parents’ choosing. Does his conformity to custom in this respect mean he didn’t love her in the first place, and was it only her feelings that were strong? Or is it that he simply lacked strength to oppose his parents’ wishes? ‘He always had a weak spot for them, said he could never hurt them. He wasn’t strong enough to stand up to them, to grab the lifeline I threw out to him’ (Bhanot, 2001: 49). She envisions herself donning a sari borrowed from her mother just in case, and walking down the Coventry Road – the main thoroughfare running through the South Asian-majority area of Small Heath – to the centre where the wedding is taking place. Ultimately, her imagined confrontation with her former boyfriend at the wedding throne and his unresponsive gaze back at her confirms and emboldens her in her attempt to forget and move on.

A quite different experience of marriage is recounted in Amina Shelly’s story, ‘A Bowl Full of Silence’, which revolves around Shefa, a sixteen year old girl from Handsworth, about to sit her GCSEs. The point of departure in the story comes at the dinner table one evening when Shefa’s father’s expresses what turns out to be a dying wish to find his daughter a husband:

‘A father has to do his duty, get his sons and daughters married before he dies. But in my case, it must be the daughter first because you never know what might happen tomorrow. Boys can take care of themselves if need be. But girls…’

(Shelly, 2001: 89)

Having settled on Shefa’s cousin Aziz in Bangladesh, the story traces the sequence of events that ensue from this decision: Shefa’s voyage to Sylhet for the marriage and her remaining there for several months with her husband’s family; her return to Birmingham, already several weeks pregnant, her search for employment to establish a home for her husband and satisfy the immigration authorities she can support him, the premature death of her child, her husband’s eventual arrival, and the uneasy adjustment that ensues – hers to family life and the altered set of gender roles and expectations it gives rise to, his to being in Britain and having to find employment in an alien and hostile setting. Throughout these vicissitudes, the story reveals how Shefa responds to each situation, and how she works through conflicting feelings of dislocation and change. However, the account of her responses uses condensed allusion and comparisons. Thus, whilst Shefa
does not contest her father’s decision, the disparity between their perspectives is expressed in terms of their strongly contrasting place attachments, hers to Birmingham and her father’s to Bangladesh:

‘Born in Birmingham, Shefa had a mind that thought of daffodils in spring – unlike Abba [father], who thought of rice crops. As a child she couldn’t work out how a village on the other side of the world could ever become her home. Perhaps Abba had found the answer to that.’

(Shelly, 2001: 90)

Similarly, whilst in Bangladesh for the wedding, Shefa’s sense of separation from the familiar pattern of her life is clearly profound, but is simply expressed, in a way that underscores the difference of her perspective in comparison to those around her, this time her brothers and mother:

‘Tired of village life […] Shelim and Shuhel [Shefa’s brothers] went back to Birmingham. Amma [mother] stayed with Shefa partly to look after her, but mostly because she preferred life in Sylhet. Shefa missed school. She missed her friends – they were preparing for their GCSEs; hers had been replaced with sparkling veils.’

(Shelly, 2001: 91)

The stories included in Mango Shake are more varied in theme, but likewise provide vivid evocations of the authors’ and their characters’ perceptions and experiences as British Asians in and of Birmingham. Perhaps the most poignant story in the collection is Bobby Nayyar’s ‘Handsworth Songs’, which revealingly borrows its title from John Akomfrah’s ground-breaking film of the same name on the Handsworth disturbances in 1985. The story is ostensibly written as a stream of consciousness, knitting together the shifting thoughts and personal memories of its narrator as he walks across central Birmingham and catches a bus to his home in Handsworth. However, by juxtaposing childhood experiences of racism with descriptions of the changing social scenery of the bus journey home, the author conveys an image of what he clearly regards as the simmering communal and racial tensions that operate at various levels within the city: from the micro-politics of who sits where on the bus, to the social arrangement of the streets and locales of which the city is comprised. This image is heightened, moreover, by the liminal use of the second person in the story, which shifts the narrative from a purely subjective account to one of internal self-objectification:

‘You are seven and standing in a corner-shop queue. A white man is smoking in front of you. He is tired by the wait and tired of the people who have come to surround him from street
to street. In the quietest form of protest, he turns and flicks ash onto your bare forearm. The hot greying dust startles you, as if waking you from a beautiful dream, but you do and say nothing. It is the first moment in which you realise that you can be defined by your difference’

(Nayyar, 2006: 72)

However, the complexities of social antagonism described in the story do not fold neatly into a ‘race relations’ paradigm that places crude emphasis on ‘majority versus minority’ oppositions; rather, they are seen to be at work both within as well as across different social groupings:

‘The problem of race becomes clearer when you go to school. Everybody hates everybody. The Indians hate the Pakistanis, together they hate the blacks, the West Indians [sic] hate the Africans, they all hate the whites, the others get hated in equal measure, the whites hate in return. As you grow older you see the hatred within your own community: divided by caste, social standing, city of origin. Your father comes home from work and speaks of his troubles; you know who he hates. The hatred weaves itself from school to workplace, stabilizing across the different communities.’

And yet, for all its apparent bleakness, the story ends on a note of hope as the narrator finally finds the courage to approach a young woman of a different background to himself, with whom he has shared the bus road home many times but to whom he has never dared to talk. The encounter is sufficient to dislodge the power of the memories of his past that have involuntarily tainted his thoughts up to this point:

‘It is your stop next. You zigzag down the aisle and the stairs and get off. The air outside is peppered by exhaust fumes. In this city of people, across these fractured communities, you have made something real. You have made a connection. You walk home, still hearing the echoes of your past, but knowing that you cannot hold on to them any more than you can hold on to puffs of smoke.’

Of course, Nayyar’s and the other stories making up these collections are highly personal accounts of British Asian experiences of Birmingham from which no generalisations either can or need be made. Nevertheless, the depth and scope of these narratives provide powerful intimations of the absences within official and scholarly accounts, and taken together with the various archive materials discussed at the beginning of this section, they suggest ways in which the loud silences of existing coverage might be tentatively recaptured.
Conclusion

As the vintage and variety of writings discussed in this chapter attest, the post-war history of Birmingham is intimately bound up with processes of settlement and social reconstruction whose net result is that a fifth of the city’s population is of South Asian ethnic heritage. As we have seen throughout the chapter, writings on South Asians in Birmingham straddle what have been writ large as identifiable, if overlapping, phases of the city’s post-war redevelopment, beginning with the era of industrial expansion in the 1950s and 1960s, through the restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s, to the growth and consolidation of its service sector in the 1990s and 2000s. From each of these ‘phases’, there have emerged a raft of textual sources and documents, ranging from glossy sociological monographs to gritty ‘urban anthems’ (Dudrah, 2002) and literary streams of consciousness, all of which proclaim the key role in Birmingham’s recent history that South Asians have come to occupy. Ironically, however, the true importance of this role does not reveal itself straightforwardly in the extent to which a clear chronology of Birmingham’s ‘post-war urban change’ can be erected as a scaffold, with South Asian experiences stretched across it and expounded. And the simple reason for this is that the tensions and complexities within and between different writings ultimately resist the ordering impulse that would inform the production of such a linear narrative. We have seen, for example, how critical ‘moments’ of South Asian encounters with Birmingham have been chronicled and assessed in the sociological literature, generating insights into the systemic workings of urban markets and institutions and how these intersect to exclude South Asians and other minorities from full participation in the life of the city (Rex and Moore, 1967; Rex and Tomlinson, 1979). But at the same time, we have also seen how these selfsame moments were points of departure in sociological thought, characterised by their response to the priorities and preoccupations of the sociological discipline – an observation that is arguably no less true of contemporaneous critiques (e.g. that of Dahya, 1974). In a similar way, we have seen how recent writings on South Asian entrepreneurship in Birmingham portray instances of Asian-owned business success, articulating the significance of this to the wider context of the city’s service sector. However, we have also seen that this same ‘success’ can be couched in quite a different way, likewise with an eye to surrounding social and economic context. Looked at in a different light, however, it is arguably the sheer variety of contending accounts – possible as well as actual – that constitute the most significant testimony to the centrality of the British Asian experience to Birmingham’s ‘modern history’, since in the final analysis, the ultimate condition for this variety is the inextricable involvement of South Asians in all the patterns, processes and spheres of which the city is composed.
References


