From Diasporas to Multi-Locality: Writing British Asian Cities

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Working Paper

WBAC 007

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30 June 2009

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Writing British Asian Cities – Histories

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Every region, town and city in the UK is represented by competing local histories, some of which move against the grain of the broader historical narratives of the islands. But what are the implications of urban histories that not only highlight tensions in the idea of the nation, but also lasting narratives of British imperial power? This is perhaps nowhere more sharply felt than in the urban histories and narratives of cities characterised by significant BrAsian communities which grew particularly out of a post war and postcolonial migrant experience.¹ In this connection, the urban centres of Bradford and Leicester and Tower Hamlets are obvious points of reference, representing the key foci of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi settlement respectively in the UK. But also important are the secondary foci of Manchester and Birmingham, offering alternative, sometimes competing perspectives on Britain’s post war urban histories. This is partly a process of historical perspective in which regional and local histories complicate broader narratives in British political history, especially along the lines of class formation, as pointed out many years ago in the work of E.P. Thompson; or along the lines of an imperial history ‘core-periphery’ model.² But it is more than that too. The specifically urban presence of the BrAsian has pertinence not just for understanding migrant choices and cultures this chapter will argue, but also for historical readings of Britain’s postcolonial dilemma.

From the early 1980s and into the ‘90s, a range of oral history projects were launched amongst, or on behalf of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in Bradford, Leicester, Birmingham, Tower Hamlets and Manchester (and other cities too like Sheffield, Nottingham).³ These mostly unsynthesised projects preceded the emergence of popular historical texts (with the exception of the work of Rozina Visram) and set out

¹ Comment on your use of the term ‘Brasian’
² E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Classes;
³ See for example, Irna Imran, Tim Smith, Donald Hyslop and Bradford Heritage Recording Unit, Here to Stay: Bradford’s South Asian Communities (Bradford, 1994); the East Midland Oral History Archive, http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/; Connecting Histories - http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/.
narratives of a national ‘British Asian’ presence, as well as the efforts of local and national governments to publicise the ‘multicultural’ nation/locality. Yet the emergence of ‘multiculturalism’ as a concept has also gone hand in hand with a critical mismatch or discomfort between the politics of the local/national ‘British Asian’ history on the one hand and mainstream (and popular) British historical narratives on the other. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the five cities under analysis – Bradford, Leicester, Birmingham, Manchester and Tower Hamlets London. This has happened in ways which tell us a great deal about how the grand national British historical narratives have been an ideological product of official concerns surrounding British international power since 1945, and about the ambiguous historical and glocal political representations of ‘migrant’ or ‘minority’ in the UK, such as the South Asian presence.

Historical work from the academy or universities as an epistemological framework too has sat quite uncomfortably with the South Asian presence in the UK, even taking into account the emergence of new trends in global history, such as the ‘new imperial history’ and cultural turn in writing about the British Empire. There is a great deal to be learned from this discomfort. Firstly, the South Asian presence has been relatively downplayed, even marginalised both in popular British histories and the historical profession in the academy. This has created a situation in which the histories of such communities (where they are studied) are treated in University courses under themes such as ‘migration’, ‘ethnicity’ or ‘multiculturalism. More generally it has perpetuated the division of the field not only into nation-state sized chunks, but also the separation off of South Asia from European histories as the ‘Third World’, ‘The Rest of the World’ or ‘Wider World’ in the

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4 Some of the most significant of these texts, referred to in more detail below include Rozina Visram, Ayahs, Lascars and Princes (1986), South Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History (London, 2002); Antoinette Burton’s At the Heart of Empire (1998); Michael Fisher, Shompa Lahiri and Shinder Thandi, A South-Asian History of Britain: Four Centuries of Peoples from the Indian Sub-Continent (Oxford, 2007) Judith Brown, Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora (Cambridge, 2006); Ron Ramdin’s Reimaging Britain (London, 1999) and Humayun Ansari, The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain since 1800 (London, 2004).

5 Reference here to Kenan Malik remarks from Meaning of Race

6 The ‘new imperial history’ is influenced by the work of Edward Said and postcolonial discourse theory. It refers to work that has appeared since the mid 1990s, looking at issues of cultural and mental domination, and the nature of colonial power and presence implicit in a range of textual outputs.
academy. This has a direct effect on the nature of specific urban narratives. Marginalisation has also occurred in other ways – allowing certain selected national, ethnic or religious communities greater public exposure than other groups or minorities, in British representations of South Asians. This process of selection is of course partly influenced by the lobbying powers of community leaders themselves. But it has also produced a disconnection between the history of the BrAsian city in this sense, with its grassroots oral historical narratives, and mainstream historical writing about Britain. Our ‘Island Story’ has encouraged representations of minorities in ways that reflect the older surviving priorities of colonial states and regimes, in subtle but important ways. Key to this, we argue, is the broader failure of British civil society and state to fully come to terms with the complex implications of the imperial past for colonial subject-citizens.

The histories of our five urban centres, from a BrAsian perspective often remain as ‘alternative’ histories, either confined to largely unsynthesised community-history projects, or consolidated into social science disciplines examining urban ‘problems’.

This chapter will go on to suggest that the relative marginalisation of colonial subjects or ex colonial migrants in Britain’s historical narratives is also part of a larger, paternalistic nation-state building project at three interconnected levels. Firstly, grassroots oral history of South Asian communities in our five cities is very much tied into a state sponsored ‘community relations’ paradigm which selects particular community voices and which sits uncomfortably with academic accounts. Secondly this process serves to reinforce the wider dominant narratives of the British island history. At a third level, it connects to the problems of methodological integration and subordination of ‘community led’ oral history products and the ‘History industry’ that promotes them. Advocating a framework which incorporates the multi-local bases of BrAsian identity, and their impact on British cities, we question the extent to which the nation state has survived at all as the

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7 These terms have been taken from expressions adapted in History departments in two leading Russell Group universities in the UK, separating out non-European and non-north American history from the mainstream.

8 See H.E. Marshall, Our Island Story... This text is repeatedly evoked by the darling of New Labour popular historian, Tristram Hunt in his ideological battles over chronological narrative in British History. The very emphasis on chronology itself here by both sides, who both celebrate Our Island History, importantly, also reinscribes the dominant selectivity of British historical writing, in ignoring counternarratives, or dismissing such counternarratives as ‘identity politics’.
principal paradigm in historical writing. This point relates to the relatively recent trends in imperial history, which attempt to break down traditional approaches to the relationship between nation and empire by focusing either on transnational connections, or on cultural histories. Importantly, these trends coming out of imperial history are yet to have a significant impact on the urban BrAsian histories of Bradford, Leicester, Birmingham, Tower Hamlets, Manchester or other contexts, even at a national level.

There are other methodological and thematic considerations that flow out of these first two points for historians. First is the consideration of how far the historian should seriously adopt existing chronological phases of formal colonial power, particularly the events surrounding political independence of the states of South Asia. The chronologies of those dispersed around the aftermath of empire cut across and complicate the classical narratives of independence. And if we accept the notion that ‘coloniality’ (the experiences of postcolonial subject-citizens) structures history writing in the post war world, working to marginalise certain ‘ethnicised’ minorities, there is clearly a need now to rethink the relationship between different phases of European imperialism. This is particularly pertinent when we look at how the local and regional histories of the urban BrAsian presence followed quite different, often specific chronological trajectories, relating to multilocal factors such as changing local government policies, immigration law, the actions of city councils and the importance of specific local histories in South Asia. A further methodological consideration involves the effects of different kinds of historical writing – thick, period specific cultural histories on the one hand and long-duree surveys on the other. We will look at this particularly in relation to the Second World War and decolonisation, the apparent and artificially represented shift from the colonial to the post-colonial.

Finally, we seek to examine the issue of how historians might get to grips with the relationship between the local and the global in the South Asian presence, bearing in

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mind the *a priori* borders that delineate the historian’s view of the nation-state. Here, we will introduce the notion of ‘multilocality’ as an alternative framework for representing the British Asian post-War counter narrative. If the ideological project of nation state building is one thing behind this marginalisation, how far can historians upset the normal spatial boundaries of analysis?

_South Asians, the British historical narrative and the Nation-State_

The apparent marginalisation of ‘minority’ voices, such as those of the South Asian communities, from broader histories of the British Isles is to a great extent, the product of the internal drive to create ‘authentic’ local histories, which correspond to public policy initiatives. The divergent projects of local and national history, and how they are entangled with state agendas will be explored more in the section which follows this one. However, marginalisation can also be viewed from the perspective of the main popular and academic historical texts dealing with the South Asian presence in Britain as a whole. The following section will look at some of the texts that are produced by authors connected both to the academy and to public policy – a situation which has produced a very particular kind of history. For most of these writers, either directly or indirectly, the placing of South Asian migrants in particular on the periphery of the historical narratives of the British Isles as part of the direct survival of the colonial project. This could be seen as partly in terms of what Bernard Cohn has described as the colonial gaze – something which has encouraged a dehistoricised body of subjects. An example of how this framework has come into historical writing on the South Asian presence can be seen in Humayun Ansari’s _The Infidel Within_. Humayun Ansari’s career is relatively unusual in that it connects the field of ‘ethnic’ and ‘race relations’ to a career in History. Ansari is Director of the Centre for Ethnic Minority Studies at Royal Holloway, London, but also a Professor in the History department. In addition, as public policy shifted its

\[10\] Here, I refer to some of the recent work on Indian partition and independence, which looks at the more long term process of establishing the nature of citizenship in India and Pakistan. See, in particular Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, _The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia_ (Princeton, 2007).
attention on ‘minority’ affairs away from ‘race’, to issues of ‘faith’, he was involved in high level government discussions about terrorism and ‘community relations’ as a special advisor to a Home Affairs Committee. Ansari suggests that the British Muslim was especially thought of as an outsider in the context of a 1980s historical imagination, which rooted British History also in a Christian white past. The historical imagination, for Ansari seen as a powerful force in British popular culture was an out-growth of the traditions of whiggish history, linking Britain’s political development to religious and ecclesiastical changes.

The histories of South Asians migrating to the islands therefore place Britain’s political development at the centre of historical explanations for such international movements. Most of the current texts dealing with Britain’s South Asian presence, relate the key points of migration for these communities to moments of crisis for Britain specifically, underpinning the dynamics of British class politics. Ron Ramdin for example, links black and Asian history to the sense in which labour histories have played out in post war Britain, but specifically to the class politics and industrial change pertinent to the white British population. Ramdin, who migrated to England from Trinidad in 1962, is a largely freelance academic, with strong links to British media and Carribbean community organisations in the UK. Like Ansari, he too has been coopted into public policy initiatives, think-tanks and government committees, but interestingly in a phase when ‘race’ rather than ‘faith’ was a key focus for government. For example, he was on the First Greater London Council’s Multicultural Education Standards Committee in 1989, and also served on the first ‘Think tank’ Advisory Committee of the Trinidad and Tobago High Commission in 1990. In 2003, Ken Livingston appointed him to serve on the Mayor’s Commission on African and Asian Heritage. The key part of Ramdin’s narrative is post-war economic reconstruction, not political transformation following the end of British rule in India or processes of decolonisation elsewhere. With the exception of the works like that of Rozina Visram, most writing on the South Asian presence has

11 This idea is used in Bernard S. Cohn, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India (Princeton, 1996).
12 Ansari, pp. 1-14.
focussed on the post war era, and the specific politics of British economic regeneration, as a defining moment for ex colonial migration. This emphasis is central to how black and Asian migrant workers’ rights as citizens in the ex colonial metropolis have been at times contested or uncertain, and certainly open to the criticism of anti immigrant political lobbies and parties. Yet, from the bottom up, this grand narrative which focuses on British crisis does not properly encompass the specific motivations for movement, as experienced by various migrants since the late 1940s. Indeed, the specific economic motivations for movement could very easily upset this broader historical narrative relating to post-war economic reconstruction.

More subtle in these narratives are the ways in which social and political histories of migrants slip back into assessments of the success or failure of communities, to a great extent taking away some of the agency behind political transformation. This process parallels the tendencies for community leader selection described in the oral history projects above, effectively creating minorities within minorities. Judith Brown’s *Global South Asians* for example, building on an older social science approach, largely problematises the South Asian presence as subjects of the western moralistic gaze or the state’s observation. In this text, as in the older work by Roger Ballard, the specific migrant trajectories of particular communities are related to measures of ‘success’ in terms of economic power and status advancement. Brown is principally a scholar of Gandhi, linked to the ‘Cambridge school’ generation of Indianists, South Asian area studies, and one of the principal editors of the Oxford History of the British Empire, and so her foray into South Asians in Britain is something of a general introduction. However, such approaches, in producing ‘overviews’ of the South Asian presence, run the risk of reproducing uncritical readings of official sources, such as censuses and official reports – an issue pointed out for the colonial historian by Bernard Cohn, in his delineation of ‘colonial knowledge’.

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14 The best known manifestation of this uncertainty revolved around the stance of Enoch Powell at the time of his famous ‘Rivers of blood’ speech on 20 April 1968, see *The Birmingham Post*, 22 April 1968.
15 This is especially the case in the work of Judith Brown, Shompa Lahiri, Thandi, but also to some extent in the work of Rozina Visram.
Behind these processes of marginalisation is the continued media and academic focus on the nation-state in historical research about Empire. Evidence of this can be seen in the on-going popular appeal of accounts of British Imperial History that largely recreate the notion of British benevolence: In the UK, there were an estimated 2.3 million viewers of Niall Fergusson’s series ‘Empire’, well known for its ‘revisionist’ approach to the impact of British imperial power, and which harked back to Thatcherite emphasises on the ‘great men’ of British History. Despite popular, Alan Bennett’s satire of Fergusson in The History Boys barely scratched the surface of a powerful tradition in British historical scholarship, which sees Britain’s survival through 1940-5 as its finest hour, and placing this crisis at the forefront of the decolonisation process.\textsuperscript{17} It was this same national tendency which led to the overwhelming British popular vote for Winston Churchill as winner of the BBC’s ‘Greatest Briton’ accolade with nearly 450,000 votes in 2002.

Many of the general histories of the South Asians in the UK naturally reflect these hegemonic representations of Empire and Nation (and Empire-Nation interaction), although a few offer alternative foci. Ron Ramdin’s work appropriates the traditional narratives of British History and attempts to reintegrate into them a sense of ‘black and Asian’ historical trajectories. Ramdin brings colonial migrant histories clearly to the fore in thinking about representations of British history. For him, ‘British history should no longer be written from the point of view of English nostalgia. Rather, it needs to reflect British multiculturalism, for this has been Britain’s identity for centuries.’\textsuperscript{18} Throughout his Reimagining Britain, sport, art and literature in each period are mixed up with political change and designed to create a totalising British picture which incorporates the black and Asian presence. In the work of others on the South Asian presence, there is rarely even a willingness to critique the framework of the nation-state as a primary point of analysis.\textsuperscript{19} Nevertheless, some historians have attempted to move away from a direct focus on the nation-state – for example, Judith Brown and Antoinette Burton. The latter, as we will see further below, deliberately attempts to look at the colonising process in

\textsuperscript{16} Brown, pp. 124-70.
\textsuperscript{17} ‘The Empire Strikes Back’, John Harris, The Guardian, 3 June 2007.
\textsuperscript{18} Ron Ramdin, Reimagining Britain (1999)
reverse – in other words, considers how far colonial migration also constituted the metropolis itself, thereby breaking down the ‘nation-empire’ dichotomy.\textsuperscript{20} This may be linked to the fact that Burton herself is not a product of the British Imperial History stable from the 1960s-70s, but originally a Victorianist working on gender and imperial culture.

But perhaps the most distinctive historical syntheses and research have been produced by Rozina Visram, who has not only charted the full depth of South Asian migration to the British isles, but has looked specifically at the issue of how Indian migrants were subject to the double bind of subaltern identity, on the basis of both class and race. Importantly, in all of her work (which is markedly separated from the academy but nonetheless richly researched and constructed), Visram indirectly challenges some of the central tropes of both British Imperial and British working class identity, especially in urban contexts. The earlier work of Rozina Visram for example, describes how lascar identity knitted together a sense of Empire through the combined imagining of different localities, which had their impact on the meaning of the metropolis for colonial subjects.\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, this process of the translocal and transnational affecting the meaning of the nation-empire dichotomy has driven the work of sociologists like Paul Gilroy. In his \textit{Black Atlantic}, he states:

\begin{quote}
The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through [a] desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity. These desires… have always sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national and political cultures and nation-states in America, the Caribbean, and Europe.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Although there is variation in its application then, the very framework of the nation-state and the need to maintain it, has to some extent shackled a broader historical consideration of these peoples, especially as the British nation state still tends to be separated from the idea of its Empire. Histories of ex colonial subject-citizens that use the paradigm of the nation state insist that we have markers of majority and minority, and suggest that latter is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} For example, the recent edited volume, Michael H Fisher, Shompa Lahiri and Shinder Thandi, periodise their account around earlier and later phases of migration, which revolve around British political narratives.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Antionette Burton, \textit{At the Heart of the Empire} (1998), p. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Rozina Visram, \textit{Princes Lascars}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Paul Gilroy, \textit{Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness} (1992), p. 19.
\end{itemize}
always ethnicised. ‘British Asian’ narratives were always going to sit uncomfortably with the national history, since their position was ambiguous in relation to mainstream ideas of British citizenship. Moreover, nation state driven narratives insist that we consider migrant identities as relatively static, curtailing their renegotiation, particularly around the issue of managing domestic life and family/business affairs on more than one continent. Whilst oral histories allow the renegotiation of migrant identities in new ways, as described above, the thin analytical component of oral historical research is only very weakly taken up by historians at large.

Academic and popular histories of ‘British Asians’, in addition, either explicitly or implicitly tackle the difference between formal citizenship on the one hand and racialised conventions on the ground on the other. This dichotomy means that for South Asians in the UK for much of the Twentieth Century, their relationship to the British state, and to their respective local states have been represented in texts as ambiguous. This sense is very well illustrated in the work of Visram, who examines in detail the historical attempts to deny citizenship to South Asian migrants. For Visram, the authority of the state in this respect was illustrated in legislation running through the period of British colonial power in India: the 1823 Lascar Act, the 1894 Merchant Shipping Act, and other enactments of the 1920s and early 1930s. Visram’s work is particularly useful here in setting out the very subtle and critical ways in which the shape of the British nation-state in the modern era was, to an extent, forged around exclusion of colonial migrants. For Visram at least, maintenance of national integrity was not just about the boundaries of the state on the island, but also about imperial power.

Visram and Burton implicitly argue that maintenance of the idea of national integrity and power, and through it ‘Britishness’ over this long period, was connected to everyday social conventions of segregation, racial and class prejudice and sexuality. This was manifest in the crucial area of the control of Indian students in the UK, particularly

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24 Visram, pp. 196-224.
monitoring through the universities and files on those aiming to serve in the Indian Civil Services\textsuperscript{26}, treated directly by Lahiri, looking at the Indian Student Department and Bureau of Information, which sought to check ‘immorality’.\textsuperscript{27} Control of South Asians at home was very much a part of the whole project of maintaining authority in India. Particularly important in this respect, was the need to control contacts between Indian men and British women – something illustrated in the attempts to treat convalescing Indian soldiers in the UK during 1916-18 with male only nursing staff.\textsuperscript{28} Clearly defining the role of white women in relation to Indian men was also central to both the colonial project and the national idea. Visram and Burton then, implicitly theorise Empire and metropolis less as separated political spheres, than as intimately connected worlds, not just from the point of view of imperial governance, but also from the perspective of colonial subjects/citizens. This relationship did not always work out in expected ways: Visram points out how the Government of India was often vocally opposed to the implications of the Merchant Shipping Act in effectively depriving South Asians of citizenship rights in the mid 1920s.\textsuperscript{29} Through these kinds of histories, we get an insight into how the very project of maintaining imperial authority undermined some of the bases of state driven notions of citizenship.

Closer historical analyses of South Asian identities in the UK therefore often upset the standard paradigms of identity and power, which were comprised of an official collective sense of national identity – forged over the period of colonisation, and surviving into the post-colonial era. As a result, the links between nation and Empire described in different ways by Visram and Burton, sit uncomfortably with popular British historical narratives, since by complicating the idea of the nation state, they disturb the boundaries of British sovereignty. In a more direct sense, as mentioned in the introduction, the local and regional histories of the urban BrAsian presence followed quite different, often specific chronological trajectories, relating to multilocal factors such as changing local

\textsuperscript{26} Visram, pp. 161-2; Examples of the surveillance of Indian students can be found in the Oriental and India Office Collection of the British Library, in Service and General files, L/SG/7/147 – ‘ICS Examination 1937, Exclusion of Undesirables’.
\textsuperscript{27} Shompa Lahiri, ‘From Empire to Decolonisation’ in Fisher, Lahri and Thandi, eds., pp. 128-30.
government policies, immigration law, the actions of city councils and the importance of specific local histories in South Asia. This is well described in city histories such as John Eade’s *Placing London: From Imperial Capital to Glocal City*, which demonstrates how the multiple local concerns of postcolonial migrants (straddling far flung, divided homes) come to shape the ‘personality’ of a city, how it is represented and imagined as a metropolis, but do so in an unstable way.\(^{30}\)

Ron Ramdin’s work brings the broader critique of British sovereignty in relation to regional identity in a more direct sense right up to the 1980s: ‘The sense of superiority which the English felt in earlier centuries towards other parts of the British isles, and then in relations with the subjects of its widely dispersed colonial, Empire was now being exercised in Thatcher’s approach to Europe.’\(^{31}\) Connected to this, were more fluid notions of imperial citizenship which questioned existing patterns of national sovereignty, from the position of the displaced, minority status of migrants from the Indian subcontinent. At another level, the idea of citizenship has been examined from the point of view of cross-cutting allegiances. Humayun Ansari for example, represents this in his discussion of notions of *umma* among British Muslims.\(^{32}\)

However, the critiques of the idea of the nation state in this work on South Asian migrants and settlers in the UK, are somewhat hesitant.: The analytical reconfiguration of the idea of ‘nation’, in relation to experiences of ‘Empire’ are implicit rather than direct, and in many cases they are still bound by the nation as a frame of reference. With the exception of the work of Burton and Brown, most accounts fight for the idea of the South Asian presence within a predetermined British space. A further important dynamic in the power of the ‘national idea’, is the privileging by most historical accounts of certain kinds of spaces and communities over others—something which has important implications for how we relate the historical experiences of specific urban communities in our five cities

\(^{29}\) Visram, p. 218.
\(^{30}\) John Eade, pp. 5 – 8.
\(^{31}\) Ramdin, p.
\(^{32}\) Ansari, pp. 404-6.
to the idea of the nation in Europe and Asia. This is a theme to which we will return in the final section.

*Thick/thin history and the significance of periodisation*

So how far could future research overcome these problems in the historical representation of the British Asian presence, by shifting the boundaries of analysis? We would approach this from the point of view of ‘thick history’ (detailed, quasi-anthropological accounts of political and cultural experiences in the past) versus *long duree* on the one hand and different kinds of spatial analysis on the other. To some extent, these methodological dichotomies reflect the processes by which newer cultural histories have emerged out of, and challenged older political histories dealing with Empire and imperial migration. The debates between exponents of cultural historical approaches, and those researching around older political frameworks has been going on for some time now in Imperial History and the history of India for example, but importantly, they have not properly entered into historical writings on the South Asian presence in the UK.

One of the problems that popular and academic histories of the South Asian presence do address however, is the need to acknowledge a deeper ‘coloniality’ to the post war world. This can certainly be seen in the broad temporal analyses presented by Visram. The challenge now facing the historian of the South Asian in Britain is to maintain this *long duree* sense while also representing the specific, the local, and the particular of individual or family experience, by maintaining the precision and analysis of a thick cultural history analysis. To some extent, the city meetings in Bradford, Leicester, Manchester, Birmingham and Tower Hamlets, have tackled this issue of time scale versus concentrated textual analysis, by suggesting that the histories of South Asian migrants to the UK might be thought of in terms of deeper histories of migration. Trish Lawson for example in the Bradford meeting, among others, discussed how the South Asian presence might be linked to earlier migrant communities in the city.33 This relates to an early

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project of the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit, *Destination Bradford* (1987), which juxtaposed Asian migration with that of Irish, Jewish and Eastern Europeans.\(^{34}\)

With the exception of the work of those such as Antionette Burton, and the research appearing in journals such as *British Studies*, nearly all historical accounts take the *long duree* approach. Burton is, importantly, a self confessed cultural historian who historicises particular short periods in depth, looking at 3 key Indian migrants\(^{35}\) in the Victorian period, and producing a kind of ‘thick’ history, which works also rather like a form of ethnography. The reasons for the greater popularity of surveys, obviously link to the relative youth of research on South Asians in the UK, and the initial desired markets of UK publishers. Of more detailed significance is how such histories juxtapose their content matter. Ron Ramdin, for example, compares traditional longer term British history narratives to histories of the black and Asian presence in Britain, in one place linking British imperial ideologies to English dominance over Britain’s celtic fringe. He also links the history of the island to what would traditionally have been described as ‘area studies’\(^{36}\) In this interesting (though possibly teleological) approach, he is able to suggest that cultural diversity and conflict has ‘ancient origins’ on the islands.\(^{37}\) Lahiri is even more specific about the need to consider earlier phases of British history to frame the post war world: she highlights the claims for British justice and imperial citizenship, as part of a longer historical trajectory of struggle for civic rights going into the post independence period.\(^{38}\)

But the key issue in this periodisation is that of change and decolonisation on the one hand and the notion of ‘post war’ Britain on the other. Recent research around partition and independence for India and Pakistan has suggested that the ‘event’ of independence on 15 August 1947 should be separated out from the much more ambiguous and drawn


\(^{35}\) At the Heart of Empire traces the life histories of Pandita Ramabai – Indian educator and social reformer, Cornelia Sorabji – leading female lawyer of the 1930s and Behramji Malabari, the Indian social reformer.

\(^{36}\) Ramdin, p.

\(^{37}\) Ibid, p.

\(^{38}\) Lahiri, pp. 127-57.
out process of how ‘independence’ was experienced.\textsuperscript{39} For Hesse and Sayyid, such a separation is necessary as a way of challenging the idea of nation-Empire dichotomy outlined above, and to see instead continuities of British ideas about race, empire and nationalism across the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{40} Yet, importantly, most published historical narratives either explicitly draw out a separation between pre and post war/ colonial and post-colonial, or implicitly do so. Both the process of decolonisation over key moments of independence and the end of war, are accepted as key turning points, despite the fact that the social histories of South Asian migrants to Europe follow very different kinds of chronologies.

Perhaps most markedly, a great deal of stress is, and always has been placed on the Second World War, and the immediate period of decolonisation as part of the war crisis in both popular histories and the academy. As mentioned above, the particular characteristics of the decolonisation process in the grand British narratives, privilege the heroism and loss of the war, over the implications of imperial retreat.\textsuperscript{41} In this narrative, the stiff upper lip and ‘never surrender’ attitude of the idealised Londoner, provides a powerful image of the period, and something which plays out in official representations of national identity.\textsuperscript{42} Because British colonial power declined at an acknowledged moment of national adversity, the loss of Empire is represented in this trope more as a glorious and noble retreat, than a partition, scramble, or readjustment.

Taking account of the power of the Second World War as an idea in the British historical narrative, is important in coming to terms with how coloniality has structured the marginalisation of migrant histories. It also points to the need to examine the deeper colonial structures and mentalities which also shaped and affected migrant histories. This is perhaps best illustrated in the point made by Rozina Visram repeatedly in all her work,

\textsuperscript{39} This is one of the themes for a new AHRC research project connecting the University of Leeds with Royal Holloway, University of London – ‘From Subjects to Citizens: Society and the Everyday State in India and Pakistan, 1947 – 1964’.
\textsuperscript{40} Hesse and Sayyid, p.
\textsuperscript{41} One of the classic textual examples of this is produced by one of most long-standing and popular national historians, and media darling, A.J.P. Taylor, see his \textit{English History 1914-1945} (Oxford, 1965).
that the history of the South Asian presence in the UK should not be connected only to the post 1947 period. Yet, at the same time, we need to recover the detailed and distinctive insider histories of this presence, in a way that is sensitive to thick historical analysis. A clear way forward here, would be to link research to some of the main oral historical repositories in a comparative way, perhaps through some of the key oral history repositories and introductory collections described in the following section. Beyond this, new structured research around these archives is surely needed, especially around the ways in which local and urban histories disturb both the temporal and spatial frameworks of historical analysis. A useful first historical foray into this, is to look at political mobilisation that cuts across region, nation and globe, and which relates to generational difference. For example, recent work on Asian youth movements and the Indian Workers’ Association could provide a key to trans-national and multi local forces in generating the politics of the BrAsian urban space.43 Other oral history projects, as will be described in more detail below, directly and indirectly critique accepted cultural and political boundaries and relationships of power, which have configured the BrAsian urban histories. Many of these too, like the study of Tower Hamlets, *Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain*,44 suggest that the life experiences of South Asian migrants across different generations, connect in uneven ways to national historical chronologies.

### Oral Histories and marginality

Although oral histories of South Asians in the UK very often contain commentaries on urban histories of the UK’s most important cities, there is still a sense in which academia considers these texts and projects to fall into the territories of area studies and/or social

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42 This was a sentiment and form of identity that both Margaret Thatcher and New Labour, in different although comparable ways, encouraged and played upon since the early 1980s, particularly from the era of the Falklands War.

43 On the AYMs, research has been carried out by Anandi Ramamurthy, at the University of Central Lancashire, see [http://www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/Manchester%20session%20three.html](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/Manchester%20session%20three.html) (accessed 16 September 2008).

policy. By and large, most oral histories of South Asians to be found in University Libraries in the UK are held in Sociology or Social Policy sections. In one University Library we searched, the texts were held alongside work on race relations, theories of race, urban geography and urban development. Rather than being acknowledged as texts which create counter-narratives to the histories of Britain’s cities then, these texts have often become the raw material of the social scientist, identifying ‘problems’ of social exclusion and racial harmony. Equally, very few of the texts appeared in university syllabi for History degrees in the UK, either in social history courses on postwar Britain, or on (rarer) courses on migration and diaspora from a historical perspective. Despite the fact that the cultural history turn has pushed the social and cultural historian more towards the examination of mentalities, experience and representation, this rich research material has remained largely dormant. Both in cataloguing and intellectually, the discipline of History has failed so far to fully own these oral histories. As will be explored below, as well as being affected by the historiography of post-war British decolonisation, there are also methodological reasons for this mismatch.

While most of the oral histories relating to Britain’s BrAsian cities are generally as much ‘collages of attitudes, feelings and beliefs’, they nevertheless act as quasi-primary sources, sometimes light syntheses, of urban social change, especially around the dynamics of migration and diaspora. In some of the key oral histories of the urban BrAsian presence, narratives of social change, experiential material on displacement, travel and migration, and political confrontation is abundantly present. The clearest examples of this are to be found in the very urban spaces where the sense of BrAsian identity has made (for public policy makers and the media), its strongest mark: Bradford, London Tower Hamlets and Leicester. The key texts for these cities range from the research monograph work of Joanna Herbert’s Negotiating Boundaries in the City, to the more informant-inspired compilations and light syntheses of the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit’s, Here to Stay: Bradford’s South Asian Communities, Eade, Ullah, Iqbal and Hey, Tales of Three Generations of Bengalis in Britain and Martin and Singh, Asian Leicester. The first part of the dual volume pictorial publication, Here to Stay, based on

45 Tim Smith in Preface to Here to Stay
over a hundred interviews and images collected and produced by Tim Smith and Irna Imran, traces the life histories of Bradford’s Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi communities, placing them clearly in the context of social change, and the intimate interactions between the domestic sphere of family, generational different and public policy. Importantly, these histories, although not fully synthesised by their own admission, open a window onto the changing grassroots histories of some of the central dynamics of Britain’s urban spaces, and how the image of those spaces link to other localities. In this sense, they help the historian to deconstruct traditional historical narratives of urban development/decline and Britain’s postcolonial predicament. For example, the voices of these interviewees lay out changes in the inner city, and the politics of minority status associated with that process of urban change. They trace, in a unique way, the links between national and international events and the history of the locality, for example surrounding changes in Hindu-Muslim relations following the Rushdie affair, the expulsion of East African Asians from Uganda and the politics of the Leicester city council, or the reaction of the Tower Hamlets Bengali communities to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Like few other source then, these oral histories allow the historian to link urban social change in the locality to broader processes of international debate and events in specific South Asian localities. In this sense they display, in a unique way, the very problems identified by Gilroy, of how the representation of Britain’s state-styled ‘minorities’ might break down the symbolic artifice of the nation-state, or move beyond state driven vocabularies. Perhaps more originally, they illustrate how the history of an urban ‘space’ is constructed from historically dynamic imaginaries that mobilise multi-local and global issues into a heterogenous urban context. They display then not just the static conclusions of social exclusion and marginalisation, but their local and internal dynamics over a period of generational conflict, political transformation and urban growth.

46 BHRU, p. 14
47 Ibid, p. 86
48 Martin and Singh
49 Eade
These processes are explored for a locality which, perhaps not by accident, is represented in the British media and public debate as the ‘success story’ of the BrAsian communities. Joanna Herbert’s study of Leicester is a project more closely connected to the academic infrastructure, in this case of the University of Leicester, very much reflecting the experience of our five city meetings, in which the Peepul Centre at Leicester apparently demonstrated the relatively deep and broad sense of ‘community’ mobilisation (both in economic and cultural terms) across the BrAsian presence. More importantly, as the author states from the outset, Leicester’s ‘South Asian’ communities (a term which she uses cautiously), ‘are presented as integral and vital to the city’s identity’, seized upon by local government as ‘selling points’, illustrating the success of the multicultural moment. 

Yet, the work seeks to break down, unravel or delve beneath this discourse, to look at the more nuanced oral histories of these communities and the white populations, and to focus in particular on the construction of real and imaginary cultural and political ‘boundaries’. Again, the lived experience of the domestic sphere, constructions of internal racial and cultural identities in the city, and the wider global and multi-local connections are drawn out here. Like the other accounts, we are presented with cross-cutting marginalisations at the levels of the family and gender, the community and locality and the wider ‘BrAsian’ identity and the state. Most importantly, the book shows how the mobilisation of ‘cultural capital’ over time affected the (often displaced and multilayered) notion of ‘home’ and place.

It is significant that work on Birmingham and Manchester has been even less synthesised, reflecting again in miniature, the internal sense in which these cities have been viewed as somewhat secondary foci of public policy attention, when compared with Bradford and Leicester. Both of these cities possess electronically accessible repositories of collected oral history archival material, which are the product as much of local and national government sponsored initiatives, as academic research agendas. In Birmingham, the ‘Connecting Histories’ project (carried out between 2005 and 2007), which produced a web resource and repository of oral histories and collections, was a partnership project.

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50 Joanna Herbert, pp. 1-2.
51 Ibid, pp. 170-171.
led by Birmingham City Archives in collaboration with the School of Education at the University of Birmingham, the Sociology Department at the University of Warwick, and the Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures group. The project was also supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and aimed to directly involve individuals from communities themselves to get involved in the process of recording and collecting histories. The collection holds, principally from the point of view of the BrAsian city, materials on the Indian Workers’ Association. The relative lack of synthesis in this material from the point of the city itself, gives an instructive insight into the dominance of particular themes not just in national, but also local histories. Speaking at our Birmingham event, Malcolm Dick, author of Birmingham: A History of the City and its People (2005), suggested that while older migrant communities such as the Irish or Jewish diasporas had been relatively well researched by professional histories, the oral accounts of Indians and Pakistanis had been picked up more in the fields of Sociology and Geography. Importantly, he pointed out that local history approaches had continued to reproduce narratives of the ‘great men’ of the city.52

This lacuna in the practice of local history was also noted at Manchester, where the recent research work of Anandi Ramamurthy on the Asian Youth Movements (AYMs) was explored as a notable exception to the older institutional histories of the city. Ramamurthy pointed out how both local and national histories had effectively sidelined the gendered nature of oral histories and had largely ignored deeper analysis of inter-generational historical narratives and political activism on the left.53 Here again, it seemed that the pattern of oral history collection had taken place more as a ‘community project’, meeting the agendas of local and national government, but not well connected to the academy. Manchester’s Tameside Local Studies and Archive Unit, like the Connecting Histories, was based on a 2005 Heritage Lottery Fund grant, and largely involved the collection and compilation of oral interviews of migrants from the Indian subcontinent in the post-war era.54 As yet, it is not entirely clear how these resources will

53 [http://www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/Manchester%20session%20three.html](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/Manchester%20session%20three.html), accessed 8 December 2009.
be studied or synthesised by academics connected with the discipline of ‘History’ at large.

The relative weakness of these oral histories’ integration into the academic mainstream is intimately connected to the politics of their production then, often with a state driven emphasis on ‘community cohesion’, safe narratives and disconnection from social challenge, sectarianism or the politics of race. In short, many of these projects can be viewed as partial outcomes of the ‘history industry’, promoted by organisations like the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The industry can roughly be divided into four successive stages – funding (HLF), collection (community group), preservation (public archive) and dissemination (researcher). Each stage is, to an extent, monopolised by a specific agency, each with its own and usually exclusive agenda, which means that the four stages usually work in parallel with one another. Furthermore, whilst there is a natural connection between the four stages, similar to a relay race, each component relies on the goodwill of each agency to further the project’s reach – determined usually by the agenda of each agency.

As the main funder of oral history, the HLF\(^\text{55}\) has to a great extent driven some of the principal collections of BrAsian oral history. The next biggest supporters of specific oral history projects are probably local and regional councils, but the dominance of HLF can clearly be seen at the UK Oral History Society home page.\(^\text{56}\) The HLF was set up in 1994 on the back of the National Lottery itself, with the key aim of distributing money to ‘heritage’ projects. By 2006, it had financed 26,000 projects to the tune of £4 billion. The emphasis is on the granting of agency of communities to record ‘their heritage’, but importantly, the stress is also on ‘diversity’. The HLF’s understanding of ‘Oral History’, is very much one which links to national education agendas: there is a sense in which an HLF project would ideally have a practical outcome, perhaps as an ‘educational resource’ or exhibition/museum piece. In the main document for applicants, there is no mention of

\(^{55}\) http://www.hlf.org.uk/English/HowToApply/OurGrantGivingProgrammes/YourHeritage, accessed 2 October 2008

further synthesis or research, or even a sense in which such materials could act as sources for local, regional or national histories.\textsuperscript{57}

It is surely no coincidence that the empowering nature of oral history complements the HLF’s community cohesion agenda which emphasises ‘your heritage’, covering aspects of local and minority history. Importantly then, the HLF priorities very much link to the shifting priorities of the national and local state in promoting notions of multiculturalism as a practical tool for local councils in managing conflict and educational provision. Within the agenda that has manifested itself since 2002, at all levels of the state (although to differing degrees), the emphasis of guidance to local councils is on the prevention of ‘violent extremism’, and the issue of ‘faith’ is juxtaposed to that of ‘race’.\textsuperscript{58} We argue that the community cohesion agenda, made explicit in the HLF application process, has the effect of keeping oral history at a grassroots level and marginalises its appeal. It also promotes narratives that deliberately avoid issues of sectarian or community conflict, or critiques of the state. Applicants must explain how their proposed project will ‘help people to learn about their own and other people's heritage’.\textsuperscript{59} Applicants must also show evidence of demand from within the community such as letters of support from potential interviewees as well as the proposed audience, and make an ‘in kind’ contribution. Only those passionate about the project or that community will support it, and with that in mind, oral history ends up being produced by the community for the community.

The HLF sees ‘collecting’ as the role of the community group and encourages them to work with a public archive to ensure that oral history records are preserved. The public archive will naturally have an interest in collecting material from the South Asian community (or any other minority) since its remit is to collect material which is as representative of the local community as possible. This position was supported by the participating archives in Writing British Asian Cities, who stressed the importance of

\textsuperscript{59} \url{http://www.hlf.org.uk/English/HowToApply/OurGrantGivingProgrammes/YourHeritage}, accessed 2 October 2008
ownership for community groups. At the Bradford meeting, Trish Lawson introduced a HLF funded project which enabled West Yorkshire Archive Service (WYAS) to assist community groups in producing their own digital archives: ‘It’s their memories so it is important to encourage them to do it themselves.’ A member of the Connecting Histories project represented in Birmingham added that more and more of the material collected by the archive is initiated from within the community. ‘They will understand the work. They will manage the process so they own it.’ Ethics aside, it is also practical to employ individuals from specific communities. If the interviewer speaks the relevant language, belongs to the same ethnicity and locality, understands the cultural context, and has her own network of ready contacts, she will obviously be able to gain trust more quickly and get to the heart of the community, therefore uncovering some ‘authentic’ truths. Prefaces to oral history literature frequently emphasise this point. However, the assumption that an interviewer is better qualified simply because she understands her community better than an outsider can be disadvantageous, particularly when training focuses only on equipment use, completing paperwork, communication skills, and not necessary on improving intellectual content. Left unchecked and unchallenged, it goes without saying that it will be in the community group’s own interests to produce only ‘safe’ or uncritical histories. Curiously then, the reaction of HLF projects driven by national/local community cohesion agendas to older tropes of ‘great men’ history in local and national history, has served to effectively make peripheral or marginalise the subjects of such research further. The ‘silent voices’ that such projects purport to uncover are categorised into the paradigm of the ‘community project’, placed on a limb from the academy and ‘serious’ research. This process is not unique. On a more global scale it somewhat mirrors the fate of strands of the ‘subaltern studies’ historiography which, by presenting voices which critique dominant national paradigms, effectively self-segregate and disempower.

60 Interview with Trish Lawson, West Yorkshire Archive Service (WYAS), 15 September 2008
Archives then do not necessarily produce autonomous historical narratives. Rather, they preserve sources and make them available for others to form narratives, sometimes by going to extraordinary lengths to ensure that what they preserve becomes as accessible and inclusive as possible. For example, when Tameside Local Studies and Archive Service preserved 200 interviews, it had to allow eight hours to produce an English language transcript for every one hour interview conducted in the mother tongue. When funding does stretch to producing a narrative, it is marginalised on many levels. The project may be regarded as something of an ego boost for a particular community group, to help evoke a sense of community spirit. The tone is apologetic - a reminder that the project is supplementing a more complex history, and not trying to compete with it. For instance, a disclaimer in the preface might claim the unfolding story is just “a summary”, or a “limited first effort”. The text may be bilingual, suggesting it is for the consumption of its own community.

The HLF funded projects, where subsequent publication occurs, often adopt a community publishing approach or the work is limited to a display in a community centre or a place of worship. Lack of marketing expertise means that literature is sold through community outlets, and work is not generally reviewed beyond the local or regional level, limiting its readership beyond the locality. Again, this formed a theme of the main city meetings for ‘Writing British Asian Cities’. At the Bradford meeting, Trish Lawson of WYAS highlighted a general lack of awareness about the existence of oral histories in archives. Whilst acknowledging the importance of collecting new material, she emphasised the need for researchers, both amateur and professional, to develop and synthesise existing oral histories, in order to get them ‘out there’. Indeed, Simon Gunn remarked at the

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63 Interview with Sian Roberts
64 See http://www.tameside.gov.uk/ttv/community/localstudies/oralhistory, accessed 2 October 2008
66 Asian Leicester, John Martin & Gurharpal Singh (2002)
67 For example, see Home from Home – Reminiscences of Bangladeshi Women in Sheffield (1995), Just for Five Years – Reminiscences of Pakistani Senior Citizens in Sheffield (1990), both published by Sheffield City Libraries
Leicester meeting that some oral history collections are in effect corroding away with lack of use.\textsuperscript{68}

In Leicester, Cynthia Brown underlined the importance of universities in developing meta-narratives around oral history archives, despite their perception that oral history is inferior to other sorts of academic history.\textsuperscript{69} Indeed, the writer of a handbook on oral history alleges that the head of a university history department told him to ‘go and study proper history’.\textsuperscript{70} These academic reservations effectively limit the appeal of oral history. But there certainly is an argument in favour of greater attention from the academy, since community groups often lack editing skills and an academic cannot produce an ‘insider account’ unless he belongs to the community he is researching.

Speaking at the Leicester meeting, John Eade underlined the responsibility of editors who make selections from oral histories and construct narratives: ‘There’s a sense in oral history to celebrate things and we’re more guarded, more critical. There’s another story that isn’t told.’\textsuperscript{71} Eade worked with a community group in Tower Hamlets, where he trained young Bangladeshis to encourage dialogue between first and third generations, and also edited the oral history output.\textsuperscript{72} He argued that since the point of oral history is to empower the community group, it is pointless to make it more rigorous. Whilst Eade’s research benefited from grassroots involvement, and the oral history format attracted funding which may not have been otherwise possible, the oral histories could not be synthesised without questioning ‘how certain truths were established.’\textsuperscript{73}

There is another factor underlying Eade’s comments: Minority communities sense not only the western gaze, but also the moralistic gaze from their own community, thereby feeling pressure to convey a ‘success story’. South Asian migrants in Bradford would visit the Belle Vue Photographic Studio to have a photograph taken to be sent back to the homeland. According to the photographer, the new migrant would manipulate his

\textsuperscript{68} Referring to the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit (BHRU), based at the Bradford Industrial Museum, which has not been staffed for a number of years.


\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{71} Interview with Professor John Eade, Roehampton Institute, 8 September 2008

\textsuperscript{72} Tales of 3 Generations of Bengalis in Britain (John Eade et all)
picture, to blatantly reinforce their new prosperous lifestyle, even though they were mostly working night shifts in the textile factories and living in group houses in overcrowded conditions: ‘I’ve had them come in with three wrist watches, which must be shown, on the same arm! I photographed a couple from Birmingham with fistfuls of fivers in their hands.’

The moralistic gaze can exacerbate the halfie dilemma. In this framework, the interviewer has a sense of accountability to his community. Since he is ‘speaking from’ his community, he feels pressure to make them look good, especially if that community has been subject to negative attention. And if the starting point of the community is invisibility, the priority is to make the positive elements visible. The interviewer is keen to do a good job for the archive because he is acting as a representative of his community, so he may not relay any problems in the field. He inadvertently becomes a gatekeeper, sifting through what is worth relaying and omitting anything his community might not want ‘outsiders’ to know. This is well acknowledged within the cataloguing process itself, as one Local Studies librarian put it: ‘I think possibly that we don’t know the full picture of the interviewers. If they were meeting problems, then they probably wouldn’t have told us about them. I think they were really anxious that the project went really well.’ In this, there’s a danger that the project becomes the source of community pride and advocacy.

The HLF funding process gives leverage to those with a success story to run the oral history project. The interviewer who has ‘made good’ tends to be recommended as a role model and is also the one who is keen and has the confidence to tell his or her (usually his) story. The project invariably also has plenty of scope for reinforcing existing power structures, and the life histories of those that occupy privileged positions within the community end up dominating the collection, to a great extent explaining the

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73 Interview with Professor John Eade, Roehampton Institute, 8 September 2008
74 *Here to Stay – Bradford’s South Asian Communities*, Bradford Heritage Recording Unit (1994)
75 Abu Lughod, *Writing Against Culture* (1991)
76 Interview with Alice Lock, Local Studies Librarian, Tameside Local Studies and Archive Service, 22 September 2008
marginalization of women’s voices and experiences from oral history accounts. There is also pressure to interview the firsts, the pioneers, those that have made remarkable contribution. In one case from Coventry, for instance, the didactic nature of the oral history project was made explicit, almost turning the whole rationale of the approach back to the ‘great men’ approach of traditional Local History: ‘The project successfully met its aims of gaining recognition for the pioneers from younger generations of British Asians.’

Conclusion

In rethinking the effect of the British ‘history industry’ of the production of South Asian histories on the one hand in the UK, and the impact of hegemonic national narratives on the other, we have argued for the repositioning of British Asian historical narratives and the methodologies surrounding them. South Asian populations of Britain are not the product of the fallout of Empire but inevitable products of centuries of imperial power and engagement. Consideration of longer term connections between India and western Europe are therefore essential. BrAsian histories must also embrace the cultural turn, and the practices of thick analysis. The existing oral historical research material, and the promise of future work in this area provides ample opportunities in both of these areas, and are as yet relatively untapped. Historians need to get to grips the multitude of questions surrounding social and political identities, but perhaps more importantly, phases of incomplete decolonisation. This can only really be effectively done by critiquing sources of state gaze, and detailing BrAsian historical narratives – oral histories and testimonies.

Changing the spatial dynamics of historical enquiry provides an alternative way for historians to tackle the issue of coloniality in British political history. This is because changing the temporalities of research potentially upsets the older paradigms of centre

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77 Extract from an oral history archive, www.coming2coventry.org
and periphery in the colonial history models in new ways. One possible approach here is to think less in terms of transnationalism, which presupposes the nature of links between national identities, than in terms of how British Asians experience the many urban locations that they inhabit, within national frameworks. In other words, this involves a study of their ‘multilocal’ historical experiences. Such an approach, by looking at the links between city identities and broader national or international identities, might allow comparisons between local and global histories of South Asians. Some of the academic histories are already, implicitly following this approach. As Antoinette Burton has put it, ‘Confronting the ‘local’ effects of imperialism requires a new cultural geography and, more importantly, a radically different way of looking at those cartographies to which we have become accustomed.’ Burton aims to reinterrogate the distinctions between ‘home’ and ‘away’, by examining Victorian assumptions about the isolation of the metropolis from Empire – that ideas only effectively flowed in one direction, from west to east.

For our purposes, rethinking spatial analyses of South Asian histories in the UK connects to debates between new and old imperial history, and those between political and cultural histories of Empire. It interrogates anew the notion of centre and periphery. This point is acknowledged and tackled by Judith Brown in suggesting that to really understand the historical trajectories of South Asians in the UK, we need to look in more detail at the points of origin and connect the social and political histories of Britain with South Asia. She also takes up this point, by linking experiences on the island to experiences in subcontinental localities – how Kashmiris are involved in the civil politics of Azad Kashmir, and for example, the differing significance of Indian/Pakistani legal structures compared to British ones. Connecting histories of localities and cities to the nation and globe is also about the interaction of public and private languages. Highly significant is the interconnection between dominant and subordinate languages in the UK, compared to similar hierarchies in India and Pakistan.

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78 Burton, p. 3.
79 Brown, pp. 160-1.
The South Asian presence can be reintegrated into historical narratives in a new and more fruitful way then, by connecting specifically urban histories to broader political histories. In the city, the differential impact of ‘identity’ politics over space and time probably also calls for grounded historical research. And some of our cities meetings perhaps pointed the way, by allowing for comparisons that were significant at a national level to be analysed as they are translated into the locality: for example in looking at the transformative shifts from secular to religious identity politics (a theme that came through strongly at the Tower Hamlets, London meeting). It also allows us to make quite fruitful comparisons of the political links forged by organisations of the left – and how they connected to other protest movements in the UK and internationally.

Finally, the histories that exist surely demonstrate that the dominant project of the nation state has to a large extent obscured or held up a very rich set of histories that now need to be investigated. We would argue that the city provides an ideal focus in the UK, as a way of unpacking existing historical narratives around the nation. Such new foci would oblige us to examine the methodological distinction between the idea of source collection and archiving (traditional oral history) and the construction of narratives (academic history writing). The former needs its own sets of narrative to improve its visibility. And the latter needs to find a way of including those narratives into historical and educational agendas.