

# BANGLA STORIES

## THE BENGALI DIASPORA IN BRITAIN: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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### Section 1: Demographic Profile of the Bangladeshi Community in the UK

According to the 2001 census, 283,063 people of Bangladeshi heritage were living in Britain. This amounts to 0.5% of the total population of the UK and 6.1% of the ethnic minority population (unless otherwise stated, figures are based on data from the 2001 census). Of these, 154,000 people were born in Bangladesh (Kyambi 2005), which equates to 0.27% of the British population (BBC, 2005). The following table shows the growth in the Bangladeshi population since the 1950s.

*Table 1: Estimates of the Bangladeshi Population in the UK 1951-2001*

Year (census)	Total Number of Population
1951	2000
1961	6,000
1971	22,000
1981	65,000
1991	163,000
Actual 2001	283,000

(Source: Peach, 2005: 24)

### Age and Gender Profile

The Bangladeshi population is an overwhelmingly young one, with a median age of 18 (compared to 37 for the White population) and almost 40% of the Bangladeshi population is under the age of 16. This was twice the figure for the White population more generally where only 19% were under the age of 16. Most Bangladeshis were within the 16 to 64 age group (ONS, 2002). The age structure of the newer Bangladeshi born immigrant community also followed the general trend with over ninety percent of that population aged under 45 (Kyambi 2005).

The 2001 Census shows that nationally there is almost gender parity between the ages 15-29 (102:100), but many more men than women in the 30-44 age range (150:100)

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(Samad & Eade 2002). However, this situation is reversed in Tower Hamlets where in the 26-35 age range there are more women than men (146:100). Two thirds of women marry between 20-24 and less than 10% of men and women marry before 20. Rates of marriage are high (74%) (Samad & Eade 2002).

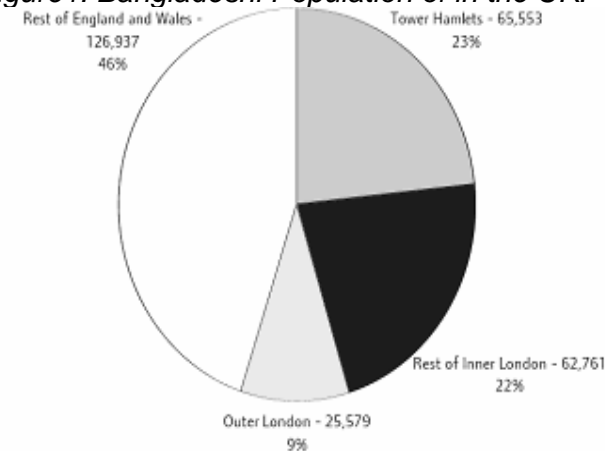
## Religion

Latest figures show that 92.4% of Bangladeshis are Muslim, which is the highest percentage for a single religion within any ethnic group (Piggott 2004). Bangladeshi Muslims account for 17% of the total British Muslim community (DCLG 2009). In addition, 0.6% of Bangladeshis in the UK are Hindu, 0.5% Christian and 0.1 % Buddhist. In the census, 5.8% did not state their religion and 0.4% said they did not follow any religion at all (Peach 2005).

## Geographical Location

Britain's Bangladeshi communities are overwhelmingly concentrated in London. Of the total Bangladeshi population in the UK, 54% lived in the Greater London area and 46% in the rest of the UK (Eade & Garbin, 2005: 5).

Figure 1: Bangladeshi Population of in the UK.



(Source: Piggott 2004)

The Bangladeshi population is the most geographically concentrated of all ethnic groups in London (Piggott 2004). Bangladeshis made up 2.1% of the total London population in 2001. Within London, Bangladeshis were concentrated in the East End with most of them living in a single borough, Tower Hamlets (ibid). The borough has been termed, by Eade and Garbin, as the 'centre' of the UK Bangladeshi population where 65,553 individuals or 22.8% of the Bangladeshi population lived (Eade and Garbin 2005). Bangladeshis account for 33 % of the total population of Tower Hamlets.

Other London boroughs with high percentages of Bangladeshis are Newham and Camden with 9% and 6% respectively (Piggott 2004: 14). In addition, large numbers are also living in Westminster, Islington, and Southwark (Eade and Garbin 2005).

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Outside of London, there is a large population of Bangladeshis in Birmingham. In 2001, there were 20,836 Bangladeshis living across Birmingham, comprising 2% of city's population. At the same time there were 9,817 Bangladeshis living in Oldham, Greater Manchester which accounted for 4.5% of that city's population. In addition there are 7,642 Bangladeshis in Luton and 4,967 in Bradford. There were also a small number of Bangladeshis in Scotland and Wales (Eade and Garbin 2005, IMO 2006:15).

Of the Bangladeshis in the UK who were born in Bangladesh, 84,500 or nearly fifty-five percent were living in London; 48,000 were to be found in the East London boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Newham and Hackney, and a further 6,000 in Camden in North London (Kyambi 2005: 76). This means that 1% of London's residents were born in Bangladesh – one of the few countries of birth to reach this percentage (BBC, 2005). Outside London there were 15,000 Bangladeshi born people in Birmingham and 10,000 in Greater Manchester. 4,288 Bangladeshi-born people were found in Oldham making it the most popular borough outside of London (BBC, 2005).

*Map 1: Geographical Spread of the Bangladeshi Community in the UK, 2006*



(Source: IOM, 2006: 16)

## ***Some Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Bangladeshi Community***

Bangladeshis in Britain are a relatively young population and are experiencing a range of socio-economic problems (Garbin 2005: 1). They are, in general terms, '...poor, badly housed and poorly educated, suffer a high level of male unemployment and have a very low female participation rate in the labour market' (Peach 2005: 23).

### ***Housing/Household size***

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In 2002, Bangladeshi households were the largest in the UK with an average of 4.7 members (ONS, 2002). In London, however, the average number of Bangladeshis per household has decreased from 5.4 in 1991 to 4.5 in 2001 and the percentage of Bangladeshi households containing more than six people has also decreased from 47% to 30%. Statistics show that 30% of Bangladeshi households are likely to live in officially recognised 'non decent homes' (HMSO 2005). According to the 2001 Census the proportion of Bangladeshis in Greater London who lived in overcrowded housing was almost three times higher than the average, and only 8% of Bangladeshi households were single person households. In 1996, Eade, Vamplew & Peach noted that 19% of Bangladeshi households lived at the highest tabulated density category (over 1.5 persons per room), compared to 0.5% of the total resident population. The percentage of Bangladeshi households with two or more dependent children was 57 % which was more than three times the national average of 17% and significantly higher than for any other ethnic group in London (Piggott 2004). 88% of Bangladeshi couples have children (compared with 49% of white couples) and over 42% have 4 or more children (the equivalent figure for whites is 4%) (Ahmed et al 2001).

Only 38% of Bangladeshis own their own homes nationally (Peach 2005) and the majority of households live in social sector rented accommodation (63%). The majority of Bangladeshis (55%) live in purpose built blocks of flats compared with 33% on average for the wider population (ibid).

## **Poverty**

Bangladeshis have the highest rate of income poverty out of all ethnic minorities with 65% living below the poverty line. Even amongst working families, around 60% of Bangladeshis were in income poverty. This was much higher than the equivalent figures (between 10-15%) for White British, White Others, Indians and Black Caribbeans (Kenway and Palmer 2007). Bangladeshi households were the least likely to obtain income from earnings, reflecting their higher unemployment rates. Wages and salaries made up just over a third (36%) of their total earnings. Social security benefits and pensions made up 19% and 5% respectively of household income (FRS 2000/2001). Two thirds of Bangladeshi children are growing up in poverty (three times the national average). Zorlu's (2001) study showed the average net weekly pay of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis as £154.28, compared to £206.60 for whites.

Remittances to Bangladesh have historically been an important feature of many households although this trend is now in decline. During the 1960s and 1970s, around 85% of families remitted their savings, whereas in 1995, this had decreased to 20% (Garbin 2004, Eade & Garbin 2005). Eade & Garbin suggest this is due to: the costs of living in the UK, the process of family reunion (whereby households are now established in Britain rather than Bangladesh) and the potential for family conflict (over land, for example) in Bangladesh. They also suggest that second and third generation Bangladeshis feel less of a commitment to their 'homeland' in terms of providing material resources.

## **Health**

Bangladeshis, across all age groups, experience a much poorer level of health than average (ONS 2002). Bangladeshi men and women were three or four times more likely than the general population to rate their health as 'bad' or 'very bad'. The average

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proportion reporting their health as ‘not good’ is 13.7%. Among Bangladeshi men this figure is 30.9% (ibid).

Based on data from 1999, Bangladeshi men were the ethnic group who were most likely to smoke cigarettes (44%). On the other hand, very few Bangladeshi women did so, although a significant proportion (26%) chewed tobacco. Amongst women aged 50-74, this figure rose to 92% (HEA 2000). This method of using tobacco was also popular among Bangladeshi men (19%), but they tended to use it in conjunction with cigarettes (Department of Health 1999).

## **Employment**

Bangladeshis have one of the lowest economic activity rates among both men (61.7 %) and women (23.4 %). The percentages of economically inactive male and females among Bangladeshis are 38.3% and 76.6% respectively (ONS 2005). Bangladeshi men had the highest unemployment rate at 20% – four times that for white men. Bangladeshi women had the highest unemployment rate at 24%, six times greater than that for white women (4%) (ONS 2002)<sup>1</sup>. Bangladeshis also had the highest percentages of ‘never worked or long-term unemployed’ of all ethnic groups (17.1% compared to 2.7 % of all people) (Peach 2005).

A high proportion of Bangladeshis work in Hotels and Catering (65%), which is six times the average for Greater London. Bangladeshis are also six times more likely than average to work in textiles or in occupations associated with printing (Piggott 2004). Self-employment is a popular route out of unemployment for a large section of the community. Bangladeshi households are much more likely to be reliant on earnings from self-employment than other ethnic groups (DCLG 2009). However, they had the lowest percentages of all ethnic groups in higher managerial professions (2.1% compared to 6.1% for the population as a whole) (Peach 2005). The new Bangladeshi immigrants have slightly better employment rates than settled immigrants (42.8% compared to 40%), although the unemployment rate for new immigrants was 7.8% compared to 6.8% for settled immigrants (Kyambi 2005:76).

## **Education**

Bangladeshis were most likely to be unqualified (ONS 2002). Nearly half of Bangladeshi women (49%) and 40% of Bangladeshi men had no qualifications (ONS 2004). Lack of educational attainment contributed to lower paid jobs and poverty (Platt 2007). In Greater London, however, the percentage of Bangladeshis aged 16-24 who were students was high at 50% compared with 45% on average, although the educational participation rate among older Bangladeshis was very low (Piggott 2004). Among the new immigrants only 6.8% had a higher qualification while 39.8% did not have any qualifications at all. However, the proportion was better than that for the settled Bangladeshi-born community (47.6%) (Kyambi 2005:76).

*Table 2: Highest qualification by ethnic group and sex, among men and women of working age*

Bangladeshi	Degree or Equivalent	Higher Education	GCE A Level or	GCSE grades A*	Other Qualification	No Qualification

<sup>1</sup> Although this may not account for women who take part in ‘homeworking’ (Kabeer 2000).

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		Qualification	Equivalent	to C or Equivalent		
Men	11	2	10	12	25	40
Women	5	2	12	17	15	49

(Source: ONS 2004)

Given the markedly younger age profile of the Bangladeshi community, however, it is important to recognise the generational shifts that are taking place and note that the educational success rate of third generation Bangladeshis has improved considerably (Samad & Eade 2002, Dench et al 2006). In 1998, in Tower Hamlets, 36.6% of Bangladeshi young women passed 5 or more GCSEs at Grades A\* to C, compared with 29.7% of Bangladeshi young men, 24.9% of White English girls and 17.6% of White English boys. Anwar notes that in 2002, Bangladeshi children achieved lower grades than other groups (45%), except Pakistanis (40%), (Indian 64%, Chinese 72%, White 50%), but suggests that these differentials can be linked to region, social class and length of stay in the UK.

Bangladeshi students are also showing improvement in further education outcomes. According to the Learning and Skills Council, success rates for Bangladeshi Learning Skills Council-funded learners in further education has increased from 71% in 2004-05 to 74% in 2006-07. In 2005-06, 32% of Bangladeshi females and 29% of Bangladeshi males were entering higher education by age 19 (DCLG 2009)

## Section 2: History of Migration

### Early Settlers (1850s to 1945)

Although the Bengali community in Britain was formed comparatively recently (Ansari 2004), the history of migration from East Bengal (and particularly Sylhet<sup>2</sup>) to Britain has a considerably longer provenance. Indeed, travel between Sylhet and Britain can be traced from the nineteenth century onwards, in particular through the region's connections with the imperial trading routes from Calcutta (Adams, 1987, Choudhury 1995, Gardner 2002, Visram 1986). Caroline Adams has noted that Sylheti *lascars* were employed by the East India Company on trading ships between India, Burma, China, the Malay archipelago and East Africa, and on occasional trips to Britain from as early as the seventeenth century. In addition, records show the presence of itinerant and abandoned seamen in East London's ports from the late eighteenth century. From the 1850s onwards, at the height of imperial rule, Bengali *lascars* were crucial for the manning of the Empire's shipping lines and large numbers of Indian sailors also worked in the engine rooms of the British merchant ships during World War 1 (when 3,427 were killed and 1,200 taken prisoner) and World War 2

<sup>2</sup> The district of Sylhet was established on 3 January 1782. Until 1878, Sylhet was under the jurisdiction of Dhaka division. In that year, Sylhet was included in the newly created Assam Province. Until 1947 (excepting the Banga Bhangra period of 1905-1911 when the British partitioned Bengal) it remained a part of Assam. In 1947, as a result of a referendum, it was attached to East Pakistan and was included in the Chittagong Division. (source: Banglapedia 2003)(website: [http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/S\\_0650.htm](http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/S_0650.htm)). The particular status of Sylhet meant that Sylheti farmers remained independent cultivators rather than small tenant farmers characteristic of the rest of Bengal; they were therefore of a higher economic and social status than many of their fellow Bengalis, had the economic means to migrate and were not keen to engage in manual labour for others, all of which combined as an impetus for migration (Gardner 2002)

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(where an estimated 6,600 Indian seamen were killed and 1,022 wounded) (Adams 1987)<sup>3</sup>.

These early imperial seafaring connections are crucial in understanding the formation of the present day Bengali community in Britain. They established routes between particular parts of East Bengal and East London, and set up networks of patrons and facilitators that were to prove central to later phases of migration (Gardner 1995, 2002 Eade & Garbin 2005). As Yusef Choudhury has noted, the district of Sylhet lay along the shipping route from Assam to Calcutta, from where the international trading ships embarked (1993). Many young Sylheti men made the journey to Calcutta, where a network of agents and boarding houses developed, providing links to employment on the ships, and to global travel (Adams 1987, Choudhury 1993, 1995). As Choudhury's and Adams's evocative oral histories of early Bengali settlers in the UK show, from the 1920s there were a small number of settled *ex-lascars* living in East London who provided similar shelter and guidance to Bengali sailors passing through London, or, occasionally, jumping ship. The numbers of Bengalis in London rose through the 1930s and in the period up to the end of the Second World War. During this period the first signs of a 'community' were apparent, under the leadership of individuals such as Ayub Ali and Shah Abdul Majid Qureshi who, together, established the 'Indian Seamen's Welfare League' in Christian Street, Aldgate in 1943 (Adams 1987). Others took on the role of the 'serang' or 'bariwallahs', replicating the boarding house/shipping agents found in Calcutta.

These early settlers found employment in the garment industry in East London and the restaurants of the big London hotels, while others travelled to the Midlands and the north of England to work in textile factories. This period also saw the establishment of Bengali 'coffee shops' catering to the new arrivals, and which later became the first Sylheti owned 'Indian' restaurants. Adams (1987) notes that by 1946 there were 20 such restaurants in London. By 1960 this number had increased to 300 across the country and to over 3000 by 1980. The end of this period also saw the establishment of the East London Mosque and Muslim Burial Societies, and in 1946, the first *halal* butchers shop was opened by Taslim Ali (who later became the first Muslim undertaker and Imam of the East London Mosque in 1956).

## Post-war migration

Although the numbers of migrants was very small<sup>4</sup>, these early patterns of migration provided the template for later migration in the 1950s and 1960s. From the end of World War II, a number of *lascars* settled in Britain, with others arriving after Indian independence and Partition in 1947 (Choudhury 1995). Adams (1987) estimates that in the 1950s the number of Sylhetis living in London numbered around 300, almost all of whom were men. Partition had cut Sylhet off from Calcutta thereby reducing the opportunities for employment in shipping to such an extent that during the period 1952-55 many former sailors faced destitution. The seamen's union obtained passports for many to work in

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<sup>3</sup> Adams notes that these latter figures come from Indian records, since no records of Indian seamen were kept in the British war records. Although these numbers included sailors from across the subcontinent's ports, she notes that since most Sylhetis worked in the engine rooms of the ships, it is likely they represented a large proportion of those that died.

<sup>4</sup> Choudhury estimates that there were between 150-200 Bengali men in East London in 1939 (1993)

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Britain, although this was partly blocked by the government in West Pakistan. In 1956, 600 international passports were granted to seamen followed by 1000 additional passports; others travelled through sponsorship from private institutions or on 'medical passports'. Most came from Sylhet along these established routes, and relied on contacts or kin networks to help find accommodation and work (Gardner & Shakur 1994).

Adams (1987) estimates that by 1962 there were up to 5,000 Bengalis in the UK, drawn by the British post-war demand for cheap unskilled labour<sup>5</sup>. Many replicated earlier settlers by working in the garment industry in East London as pressers or tailors (see Kabeer 2000), while others moved to Birmingham, Oldham and Bradford to work in the textile mills or heavy industry (Choudhury 1993, 1995). Most saw their stay in Britain as only temporary – as 'sojourners' rather than 'settlers'. Roger Ballard (1994) has noted that this 'Myth of Return' (Anwar 1979) lasted longer with Bengali migrants, whose process of family reunion and permanent settlement has been a slower process than for other South Asian communities (see also Gardner and Shakur 1994). Family ties with the homeland remained strong, with many men leaving wives and children in Bangladesh and returning 'home' frequently, and with remittances sent regularly and invested in land and housing in Sylhet.

Gardner (2002) suggests that the period from the 1950s until 1962 was 'the golden age' of migration to Britain from the subcontinent, when immigration controls were still comparatively open. The situation shifted in 1962, however, with the first Commonwealth Immigrants Act. This restricted primary migration from the Commonwealth into three categories: those with a specific job to go to in Britain; those with a recognised skill or qualification in short supply in the UK; and others (with priority given to those serving with the British forces in World War 2) (Solomos 2003). Gardner and Shakur note that this encouraged Sylhetis already in Britain to seek vouchers for friends and relatives, starting a period of sustained 'chain' migration (see also Eade & Garbin 2005, Kabeer 2000). By the 1980s, the Bengali community numbered around 200,000, with about 35,000 living in East London (Adams 1987)<sup>6</sup>.

Eade and Garbin (2005) note that the process of 'chain migration' had a twofold impact on Bengali migration: firstly, the specific regional form of migration (from 11 sub districts of Sylhet) has led to a highly localised 'geography of prosperity' in rural Sylhet (see Gardner 1995); and secondly, Bangladeshi settlement patterns in the UK are also extremely regionally specific. For example, Tower Hamlets is dominated by families from Beani Bazar sub-district (especially around the wards of Shadwell and Whitechapel), and from Jaggonathpur and Bishwhanath (in Spitalfields and along Brick Lane itself), while in Camden, families originate from Maulvi Bazar. Oldham is dominated by families from Bishwhanath and Hobiganj, who are concentrated in the two wards of Glodwick (scene of the riots in 2001) and Westwood, known locally as 'Bangla Para'. Birmingham is made up of families from Hobiganj, Sunamganj, Jaggonathpur and Bishwhanath who live in Small Heath, Lozell, Saltley, Smethwick, Handsworth and Aston (the latter in particular being dominated by families from Hobiganj).

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<sup>5</sup> Eade, Vamplew & Peach (1996) estimate the number of Bangladeshis in 1961 to be 6000 (see also Ali 2000)

<sup>6</sup> Peach (1990), however, has noted the difficulties of assessing numbers of Bengalis who were generally subsumed into the category Pakistani for much of this period. He calls Bengalis 'a concealed community' (1990: 481)

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## ***Family reunification and community formation***

The period from the early 1970s to the 1980s saw a further shift in migration patterns, with a move towards family reunification and the formation of more permanent communities in the UK. Peach notes that the 1981 census recorded 64,561 Bangladeshis living in the UK, including around 16,000 British born 'second generation'. By 1987, the Labour Force Survey placed the figure of Bangladeshis living in the UK at around 116,000, of which between 52% and 56% were born in Bangladesh. This period saw the growth of a substantial young, British born population, rising from 25% in 1981 to 40% in 1985/7 (Peach 1990). It also saw a dramatic re-gendering of Bengali migration patterns, from the 1960s where the ratio of men to women was estimated as being 40:1, towards a ratio of 2:1 by the time of the 1981 census (Kabeer 2000)<sup>7</sup>. The arrivals also included a large number of younger Bangladeshi born men and women who, as discussed below, were at the forefront of many of the early struggles around racism in the UK (Eade 1990).

These shifts can be explained by a number of factors. Firstly, new immigration legislation in the UK meant that travel between Britain and the subcontinent became increasingly difficult and migrants were concerned that they might be prevented from bringing their families over in the future, particularly children over the age of 18 years (Ali 2000, Gardner & Shakur 1994, Dench, Gavron & Young 2006). Secondly, the struggle against West Pakistan throughout the 1960s, the declining material conditions in East Pakistan (as Bangladesh was known then) and the Liberation War of 1971 resulting in Bangladeshi Independence, led to anxiety about the safety of family members. Thirdly, the decade of economic and political instability that followed Bangladesh's Independence reinforced these concerns (Ansari 2004). Fourthly, the needs of ageing male migrants led to a shift in domestic requirements (Gardner 2002) and fifthly, there was a growing realisation that with increasing unemployment amongst Bengalis in the UK, insufficient money would be available for a return 'home' (Carey & Shakur 1985, Kabeer 2000). In addition, it has also been suggested that the establishment of a sufficiently 'Muslim' context in areas of settlement meant that anxieties about the exposure of women and children to 'Western' influences were partially ameliorated (Carey & Shakur 1985, Kabeer 2000).

However, this period of reunification and settlement also coincided with a steep rise in unemployment in Britain. This was the result of a long term decline in manufacturing industries and a recession which had a disproportionate impact on minority ethnic communities, including Bengalis. Kabeer cites a 1986 House of Commons report that noted, 'Sometimes the main reason for the recent existence of a town's Bangladeshi community is a single factory, like the Birmid factory in Smethwick, now closed' (2000: 198). Ansari (2004) argues that migration from Bangladesh reached its peak in the period 1980-1988, which was also the period when UK unemployment was also at its highest. During this time, however, migration from other South Asian countries was already long in decline (see also Peach 1990). This factor, along with the high degree of concentration of Bengali communities in the UK – due in part to the forms of localised chain migration, employment patterns and segregation in a highly racialised housing market and racist context (Ali 2000) – has reinforced existing patterns of poverty amongst these communities. Ansari comments:

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<sup>7</sup> The 2001 census shows almost parity (102:100) in the age range 15-29 (although the ratio is more disparate in the 30-44 age range (150:100) (Samad & Eade 2002).

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'Given that they have arrived relatively recently, have younger and larger extended families, and find themselves in poorer economic circumstances, their quick dispersal into the broader community appears unlikely.' (2004: 172-3).

Of course, as discussed below, this period was also the time of the establishment of sizeable and confident Bengali communities, most notably in Tower Hamlets, with the growth of religious and cultural institutions and events (Carey & Shakur 1985, Ali 2000). Indeed, it is also clear that when workers lost their jobs elsewhere in Britain, many returned to the Bengali heartland in East London (Adams, 1987, Choudhury 1995, Kabeer 2000), consolidating the significance of this space in the Bengali diasporic imagination.

## **Contemporary Migrations**

Very little is known about new migrants from Bangladesh who have arrived in Britain in recent years. However, as discussed above, Kyambi (2005) notes that there are 900 Bangladeshi born migrants who arrived in the UK between 1990 and 2004. Of these, 53.5% are male. These new migrants are overwhelmingly under the age of 45 (90%) with almost sixty percent in the age range 25-44 (which possibly suggests they are arriving for marriage and work purposes). Of these new migrants, 5.6% are in full time education and 42.8% are in employment. Given the younger age profile of the Bangladeshi community, and the continued practice of marrying 'back home', Samad & Eade (2002) note that large numbers will be reaching marriageable age in the next five to ten years, and it is possible that this will be reflected in increased migration from Bangladesh to the UK.

## ***Issues for further research***

There are a number of significant points that arise from this cursory examination of the history of Bengali migration to Britain:

- 1) A striking feature of the oral history accounts of 'pioneer' settlers from Sylhet is the long established tradition of travel within the subcontinent, and globally (not just travel to the UK). This contests conventional ideas of migration in this period as being one-way travel between a point of origin and point of settlement, and places this movement as part of a broader picture.
- 2) Another important feature is the historical entanglements of Empire that precede large scale migration, and which establish routes that facilitate and replicate particular forms and places of settlement in the UK. This is important because of overly presentist accounts which place Bengalis in the UK as latecomers (Dench et al, 2005), and which contests the dominant ideas of 'self-segregation' and alienation which dominate political and policy discourses around Muslim communities in the UK.
- 3) The use of existing networks in Bengal and the UK to facilitate migration and settlement is particularly striking in the case of Bengalis and is something that is at the heart of mechanisms for community formation and maintenance.
- 4) The tradition of travel for work within the UK is also an important feature of some of these early accounts (until the 1970s). This has important implications for the placing of Bengali communities and also raises interesting questions about the symbolic and practical importance of Tower Hamlets within the UK. This additionally raises questions about the established mechanisms for contemporary forms of internal movement—for example, through the restaurant trade or marriage.

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- 5) The gendering of migration is a particularly important feature for community formation and for the exploration of diaspora, memory, belonging etc. This is an undeveloped theme in much of the literature (with the exception of Kabeer 2000, and Gardner 2002, see below). This raises further questions around the gendering of contemporary forms of migration (brides) which might fruitfully be explored.
- 6) Relatedly, the structures underpinning the particularities of the Bengali community in the UK (age profile, later community formation etc) are central to the understanding of identity, memory, processes of settlement, integration etc.
- 7) There is no work done on contemporary forms of migration although the figures suggest that there is still substantial in-migration to the Bengali community. This needs further exploration.
- 8) It is important to give due weight to external structural, political and social factors that impact on Bengali migration, both in the subcontinent and the UK. These will challenge overly culturalist accounts of migration and settlement that predominate in the current moment. Gardner argues (2002) that migration has to be placed within the history of colonialism and global capital, within the history of processes of inclusion and exclusion in Britain, the political and economic conditions of Bangladesh, the development of the Bangladeshi community in the UK, and the particular circumstances of families and individuals.

## Section 3: Identity and Community

There is comparatively little research specifically on Britain's Bangladeshi communities, while much of what exists tends to be policy- and problem-oriented (see below). However there are some significant themes that have emerged in work by John Eade, Katy Gardner, David Garbin, amongst others, around issues of identity and community, which take place in the broader field of ethnic and racial studies in the UK. In this section, we delineate some of these themes.

### *The politics of community*

As the oral history accounts discussed above clearly demonstrate, Bengali engagement with politics both in the UK and in the subcontinent can be traced to the earliest settlers. However, it is from the 1960s, when sizeable Bengali communities began to take shape, that issues of political and community identity in Britain became an important issue. In his early study of Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, John Eade (1989) traced the growth of political activism through the 1970s and 1980s and pointed to a generational shift in focus from the concerns of the first generation migrants with the politics of the subcontinent and the struggles for independence, to the emergent second generation whose primary interest was on local government and anti-racist organisations and struggles. These concerns have in turn been superseded by a new, third generation who have rejected the nationalist and secular stance of earlier activists in favour of a denationalised and religious/Islamist interest, most particularly through the 1990s (after the 1989 Rushdie Affair and the first Gulf War) (Eade & Garbin 2005). It is possible, then, to think of political mobilisation and community identity in the public sphere as occurring in three phases, which can be broadly mapped onto the issues and concerns of successive generations of Bengalis in the UK.

*First Generation:* As Eade (1989, 1990, 1991) and Garbin (2008) have argued, the first generation of migrants were actively involved in the politics of the subcontinent through the 1960s and into the early 1970s, most particularly in the resistance leading to the War of

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Liberation and Bangladeshi independence in 1971. UK migrants mobilised in support of the freedom fighters and the Awami League through fundraising, public protests and lobbying of the British government and media. Garbin sees this as an early instance of 'long distance nationalism', mainly focusing on the circulation of people and funds and the oral transmission of information. This promoted a strongly nationalist and secular identity amongst British migrants, asserting a collective and authentic Bengali identity that transcended class, caste and religious boundaries (Eade 1989, 1990, 1991, Garbin 2008). Eade also notes that this first generation had acted as intermediaries between the Bengali community and local government officials. In Tower Hamlets this led to the establishment of the Pakistan (later Bangladesh) Welfare Association.

It would be misleading, however, to see the impact of this group as being completely superseded by later developments (Eade & Garbin 2006). Garbin notes that, by the 1980s, nearly all of Bangladesh's major political parties were represented in the UK, which testifies to the ongoing engagement between the diaspora and Bangladeshi political spheres. These were mainly created and maintained by the establishment of small associations across Britain that often link connecting villages in Bangladesh with kin groups in the UK (and across which remittances are transferred, and marriages arranged). These networks continue to provide platforms for politicians from Bangladesh to come to the UK to raise campaign funds and have also established a range of UK-based elder community representatives linked to businesses both in the UK and Bangladesh (Eade & Garbin 2005). He also notes that these associations are often seen by parents as instilling a sense of collective memory and belonging to the homeland in their children, traversing the public/private divide of this political arena.

There were also incipient divisions, however, such as between Sylheti and Dhaka-origin individuals which have proved controversial even to the present day (for example, as with the furore over Monica Ali's book *Brick Lane*).

*Second Generation:* From the 1970s onwards, a new generation of younger activists emerged, mainly young men who were either born or had grown up in the UK, and whose focus shifted away from the transnational concerns of their elders towards the struggles against racism in Britain. Many, as Eade (1989, 1990, 1991) and Garbin (2008) have noted, came up through local youth organisations, which had mobilised against the high levels of racist attacks and police harassment through the 1970s and into the 1980s. Though UK- and locally- focussed, this second generation were influenced by the secular nationalist ideologies of the first generation and sought to draw links between the struggles in Bangladesh and the anti-racist struggles in the UK. Eade points to the shared celebration of national commemoration of a Bengali identity – for example the celebration of Independence, Bengali New Year etc (Boishakhi Mela, established in 1998) – which are still marked today (though have become a point of contestation between secular and religious organisations (Keith 2005, Bhatt 2006)). However, these second generation activists also forged alliances with left and anti-racist movements, and with the broader black political movements of the period, to tackle local issues of discrimination in housing, education, employment, police-community relations etc. They also became active participants in local Labour and SDP parties, and fielded a number of Bangladeshi local council members throughout the 1980s, particularly in Tower Hamlets, but also in Oldham. This has provided a strong foundation for engagement with local politics that has continued until the present time – for example, the current leader of Tower Hamlets

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Council is of Bangladeshi descent. As Garbin notes, 20 years on, many of these second generation activists have become councillors or have moved into white collar jobs in local government or the public sector dealing with education, housing, health and employment. Projects such as the Nirmul Committee and the Swadhinata Trust in Tower Hamlets are legacies of this secular/nationalist project.

This participation in local political arenas coincided with a period of regeneration of inner city communities, such as Tower Hamlets (Eade 1989, Garbin 2008, Eade & Garbin 2005, 2006) and saw the funding of a range of Bangladeshi organisations concerned with 'multicultural' projects around identity, culture and community. This period also saw the emergence of 'Banglatown' with the alliance between Bangladeshi entrepreneurs, regeneration agencies and City businesses (the Baishaki Mela is funded by Cityside, a regeneration agency working with the local council and City firms) (Eade & Garbin 2006), although here again, the space has been a site of often violent confrontation and contestation between Bengalis and Whites, and between religious and secular organisations (Keith 2005). The spread of political allegiance is also an important feature with the splintering of the Labour alliance and the increasing success of the Liberal Democrats and the Respect Party. Eade & Garbin argue (2005) that the successful incorporation of local Bangladeshis into the Tower Hamlets political arena is one major reason why the attraction to extremist organisations in the area is comparatively low. However, indications are that the situation in other Bangladeshi settlements is very different, most particularly in Oldham where there are low levels of community and political activity, except with youth organisations, and where there has been little will by the mainstream parties to woo the Bangladeshi vote.

*Third Generation:* From the late 1980s and through the 1990s, the secular orientation of these second generation activists was challenged by the growth of religiously oriented and Islamist groups, particularly encouraged by the new Labour Government policies promoting faith communities as a key agent in urban regeneration after the General Election of 1997 (Garbin 2008, Bhatt 2006). This shift needs also to be placed in the broader context of the focus on Muslim identities particularly after the Satanic Verses affair in 1989, the first Gulf War, and the rise of Islamophobia throughout the 1990s (Runnymede Trust 1997, Eade & Garbin 2005, 2006), as well as the increased tension after the riots of 2001, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the subsequent War on Terror (Begum & Eade 2005) and the London bombings of 2005. While at a national level, Bangladeshis have been largely invisible in Muslim organisations such as the Muslim Parliament, or the later Muslim Council of Britain, Muslim organisations have been active and significant at a local level, particularly since the cutting back of government funding to secular and nationalist cultural and youth organisations (Eade 1990, Eade & Garbin 2002). Eade has also connected this increased religiosity in part to the arrival of women and children into the communities and has traced some of these local initiatives back to 1986 (2005), and the mobilisation around issues such as schooling.

In Tower Hamlets, this shift was demonstrated by the rising significance of the East London Mosque (Eade & Garbin 2002, Eade 1997), which took on a range of community functions and which established close links with local youth groups, particularly the Young Muslim Organisation (YMO). The Mosque collaborated with local government agencies on issues around drug addiction, family breakdown, housing and employment, and particularly youth issues and initiatives, aimed at Bangladeshi youth perceived as being 'at

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risk' from gang and drug culture (see Husain 2007). This challenged the nationalist stance of other organisations (such as the Bangladesh Welfare Association) and that of the Brick Lane Mosque, which was seen as occupying a Bengali nationalist/culturalist space as opposed to the global religious identity of the East London Mosque (Garbin 2008). The recent expansion of the East London Mosque suggests that it will expand its sphere of influence in the locale and more broadly. Eade & Garbin (2005, 2006) and Eade (2005) have pointed to links between East London Mosque and prominent Islamist organisations, for example the Da'wat UI Islam and, after a split in 1988, the newly formed Islamic Forum Europe (IFE), which also have a presence in Oldham and Birmingham. While the role of faith organisations has been seen to be promoting community and social cohesion (Eade 2005), there is also evidence that there is a developing tension between secular and religious trends in East London – for example around the secular Mela and the role of Banglatown.

Other parts of the UK have a very different engagement with the political sphere. In Oldham, for example, which was a major site of the 2001 riots, the comparative absence of local political organisation, and the persistence of old-style nationalist and patron-client political relations, has proved an obstacle to the organisation of Bangladeshis to access regeneration funding (Eade & Garbin 2002, 2006, Kundhani 2002). The Shahid Minar monument was built in Oldham in 1997 and testifies to the strong Bengali national/cultural identity in the area (a similar monument was erected in Tower Hamlets in 1998). Eade & Garbin (2005, 2006) have argued that the tension between religious and secular ideals is less apparent in Oldham and Birmingham, although they argue the recent acquisition in Oldham (Westwood) of land to build Oldham Muslim Centre, along the lines of the East London Mosque in Whitechapel, may indicate a potential shift, as does the increased presence of the Tablighi Jamaat organisation and the Jamaat I Islami (through links with IFE and YMO) in Oldham and Birmingham. However, radical Islamist groups have failed to make a significant impact in the Bangladeshi communities (Eade & Garbin 2005, 2006).

It is important again, however, not to see this latest trend as completely overturning earlier traditions of political engagement. Indeed, the organisation against racism remains a common concern in the contemporary setting (Keith 2005), and the distinction between religious and secular concerns is not always clear-cut (for example the controversy over the annual Mela). This is particularly the case at the level of the informal and everyday interactions and lives of Bangladeshi people (see Keith 2005, 1997a, Eade & Garbin 2006, Husain 2007). In addition, the impact of racist and Islamophobic sentiments around forms of ethnic or religious expression and mobilisation remain salient (Eade 1997a, 2005, Keith 2005).

It is also important to consider gendered and generational dimensions of this political engagement and the politics of community formation. As Eade has argued (1989), the public political sphere is almost exclusively a male one and, in terms of access to formal power, is dominated by the first and second generation of activists (2005). Young people and women tend to be marginalised in the political realm, and it is indeed this sense of marginalisation that can lead to the attraction of Islamist activities and ideologies (Husain 2007). Eade argues that faith based organisations have worked to manage successfully the frustrations of young Bengalis (2005) and have also provided space for Bangladeshi women to organise (Glynn 2002).

It is also worth noting that there has been no substantive impact by Bangladeshis on mainstream politics – there are to date no Bangladeshi MPs (although this seems likely to change in the 2010 General Elections) and only one Bangladeshi peer – Baroness Pola Uddin.

## Religion

As mentioned above, the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshis in Britain are Muslim, with 92% identifying themselves as Muslim in the 2001 Census (around 260,000 people) (Peach 2005). Bangladeshi Muslims account for nearly 17% of Britain's Muslim population, the second largest group after Pakistanis. Eade notes (1997) that traditionally, Bangladeshi Muslims are Sunnis, allied to the syncretic Barelvi tradition, which emphasised the role of customs, shrines and *pirs* (Garbin 2005, Glynn 2002). Religious identification was however attenuated by the secular and nationalist struggles through the 1960s and 1970s and religion only became an issue of public identity from the 1980s onwards, with the arrival of families and dependents and a broader process of Islamicisation (Eade 2005, Eade, Fremeaux & Garbin 2001). Alongside this shift, there has emerged a contestation over interpretations of Islam and the rise of alternative traditions which stress a 'purer' version of Islam, particularly influenced by 'Deobandi' teachings (Eade 1997a, Glynn 2002), and which have been strongly critical of the syncretic and national/cultural specificities of Bangladeshi Islam (a move that has been mirrored in developments in Bangladesh itself).

There has been the growth of religious organisations within Bangladeshi communities, many with roots and funding from Muslim majority countries in the Middle East and Pakistan, as well as Bangladesh (the Dawat'ul Islam being the most influential) (Eade & Garbin 2005). Eade & Garbin distinguish between Islamist groups which are involved in politics and Islamic organisations which focus on religious activities and ideologies. They also point to the role of religious groups who claim to represent Muslims at the national level (Muslim Council of Britain, Council of Mosques, the former Muslim Parliament), Muslim youth groups (YMO and IFE) and Muslim professional groups (law, policing, medicine, engineering etc). However, these national organisations often have limited contact with local Muslim activists and organisations, although there may be links with local mosques or local groups (youth organisations, for example).

Little work has been done on the Bangladeshi community and the role of religion, although preliminary work suggests that the impact of religion is shaped in local spaces and by local issues, concerns and struggles (Eade 1997a, Eade & Garbin 2005). Perhaps unsurprisingly, these issues are most prominent in Tower Hamlets.

*Tower Hamlets:* A range of established facilities for religious worship was established in the 1980s, replacing the more private prayer rooms of earlier migrants. There are over 40 mosques in Tower Hamlets, the most significant being East London Mosque, Brick Lane Mosque (Jamme Masjid), Bigland Street and Christian Street (Eade & Garbin 2005). Each of these has different orientations: East London Mosque claims to be the oldest mosque in London, going back to the 1940s. It has close links with Jamaat i Islami (through the YMO) and a range of local youth/drug/social and welfare services, and has been hugely successful in building alliances with local government. The site has recently expanded into an adjacent car park and will be expanding its community activities. It has a more reformist

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version of Islam, and is closely associated with funding from the Middle East and Pakistan (Eade 1997a, Glynn 2002). It has been the focus of much local controversy, particularly around the recent expansion and the *azaan* (Eade 1997a). Its main rival is the Brick Lane Mosque, based in a former Huguenot Chapel built during the 1740s and later used by Methodists and then Jewish settlers. Brick Lane Mosque has close links with the Bareilvi tradition and the local Bangladeshi community, particularly the Bangladesh Welfare Association, located next door. It also has strong links with the Bangladesh government and High Commission in London and has been described as the 'Bangladesh community mosque' by secular nationalists. The Jamiatul Ummah (Mosque and Madrassah) in Bigland Street was created in the 1970s by Bangladeshi members of the UK Islamic mission and the Dawat Ul Islam organisation is based there. The Markazi Masjid in Christian Street is one of the main Tabligh Jamaat Mosques in London and focuses on missionary activities with young Bangladeshis. It avoids being drawn into local politics and is successful in its youth outreach work. Hizb Ut Tahrir is also present in the area, particularly in Tower Hamlets College, but has little apparent success in recruiting followers (Eade & Garbin 2005, 2006, Garbin 2005).

*Oldham:* there is a small presence of YMO and IFE activists locally, established towards the end of the 1990s, although with only limited resources. The YMO has around 20-30 members and IFE around 100. They are planning to build a new centre (Oldham Muslim Centre) with religious and recreational facilities, and YMO works in conjunction with other agencies (youth services, police, Sure Start). Amongst the older generation, the Bareilvi Futoli movement is well established, and the Tabligh Jamaat movement is active in the Bangladeshi dominated Westwood district of Oldham (AlKhazra Markazi Mosque), although with limited success.

*Birmingham:* As with Oldham, the YMO and IFE have limited success (IFE has around 80 members, YMO less than 30). Many of these were active in Jamaat I Islami in Bangladesh prior to migration to the UK in the 1980s and 1990s. The Bareilvi Futoli movement has many followers amongst older migrants and mosques in Aston, Lozell and Handsworth follow these practices and beliefs. The Tabligh Jamaat also controls a large number of mosques and has a greater attraction for second and third generation Bangladeshis. Hizb Ut Tahrir is active but marginal (as in Oldham).

There is comparatively little work done on the role of religion in the identity construction of Bangladeshi people and communities, although as discussed above, there is a clear tension between secular and religious trends in Bangladeshi communities (Eade & Garbin 2002, Bhatt 2006), which has surfaced particularly around issues of space and cultural identity (the Shahid Minar or the Mela, for example). However, interviews (with mainly young people) suggest that religion plays an important, but not necessarily overriding, part in their identity formation (Eade 1997b, Gardner & Shakur 1994). Sarah Glynn (2002) however, argues that religious identity offers an alternative to the parental traditions of Bangladeshi elders, and to the alienation of young people (expressed in gangs, drugs, violence) caused by poverty, racism and social exclusion. The youth outreach of YMO in particular appeals to young men and women (see also Husain 2007 for an account of his 'career' in Islamist circles in East London). Young women, Glynn argues, use religion as a way of negotiating freedom from repressive parental cultural traditions, while the East London Mosque also offers Women's Relief, an advice centre tackling issues such as domestic violence, training and employment. However, Glynn is more sceptical of the role

of religion in providing any long term and substantial social change, and argues it may actually distract from engagement with broader issues of social justice and social inclusion.

## **Gender/Sexuality**

There is very little work done around issues of gender in relation to the Bangladeshi community, although there is an emerging focus on issues concerning Muslim women as a general category and a history of work on South Asian women (Bhachu 2004, Brah 1996, Puwar & Raghuram 2003, Wilson 1978). The majority of work on Bangladeshis in the UK is concerned with the public sphere, which is conceptualised and performed as almost exclusively male, although there is some work on young people of Bangladeshi descent (see below) which deals with both young men and young women, as well as work done on Asian/Bangladeshi masculinities (Desai 1999, Alexander 2000a,b, 2005). Nevertheless, issues of migration (particularly in relation to the predominantly male dimensions of early migration patterns, and the predominance of young women in contemporary migrations), of education and employment, of the domestic and public spheres, of religion and of space and safety have clear gendered dimensions, which have been under-researched to date. It is apparent, for example, that some young women of Bangladeshi descent are achieving well in education and are moving into new spheres of education and employment that have important repercussions for their status and power within the family (Ahmed et al 2001). Young men, meanwhile, remain the primary targets of repressive state interventions and forms of control (around extremism, 'gangs', crime etc).

The role of gender in migration has featured most heavily in relation to social policy debates (see below), particularly around the processes of ageing and social care (see Ahmed et al 2001, Burholt et al 2000, Khanum 1994, Phillipson et al 2000, Gardner 2002). Ahmed et al note that 3 out of 10 Bangladeshi adults have arrived in the UK since the mid 1980s, and this group consists mainly of women and adult children. Gardner's study of Bengali elders in Tower Hamlets (2002) has pointed to clear differences in the gendered motivations and experiences of migration for men and women, with the latter often migrating to act as caregivers to children and, increasingly, to husbands and older relatives. This is reflected in a very gendered narrative form when discussing migration, with men representing themselves as active and mobile providers, focusing on issues of work and the ability to overcome obstacles, and a nostalgic account of early days of settlement, and women, by contrast, focusing on their familial roles – as wife, mother and daughters-in-law – and the performance of culturally reproduced notions of femininity (see Anthias & Yuval Davis 1992). Gardner notes that Bangladeshi women are viewed officially as 'dependents' and this implied passivity is reflected in their own and their husbands' accounts.

However, Ahmed et al have suggested that the process of migration has had profound implications for the household formation of Bangladeshis both in the UK and in Bangladesh (2001). They argue, for example, that long periods of independence due to separation from husbands in the UK have given Bangladeshi women space for control and a sense of agency, and that this independence is often curtailed or contested through the process of migration. Gardner similarly notes that for younger women, the process of migration is often tied to marriage, resulting in very different factors and forms of power underpinning movement. At the same time, women are importantly featured in the

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maintenance and reproduction of family and kin networks transnationally and in the place of migration (Gardner 2002). Khanum (2001) has similarly discussed the complex household formations which resulted from extended separation through migration; the attenuation of traditional kin support networks, she argues, has particularly serious ramifications for women (especially older women and widows)(see also Ahmed 2001). Khanum's study of Bangladeshis in Manchester has noted the proliferation of 'linked households', and has pointed to the impact of racist immigration legislation in fracturing the process of family reunification in the UK. As Gardner also notes, the impact on women of the formal immigration process has been particularly acute, with many Asian women in the 1970s and 1980s being subject to 'virginity testing' and more recently falling foul of 'primary purpose' legislation and the current concerns over 'forced marriage' (Samad & Eade 2002).

While migration is often seen as a potentially liberating experience for women, freeing them from close-knit and repressive patriarchal societies (Westwood & Phizacklea 2000), it is apparent that the consequences of migration are often ambiguous. In their new home, women are often isolated from family support networks and cultural norms are often imposed in stricter and more confining ways (Kabeer 2000, Gardner 2002), while familial care duties may be more demanding (Gardner 2002, Khanum 1994). This may be additionally affected by the experience and fear of racist attacks, which limits women's movements (even younger British born women, see Back 2005). Nevertheless, women are crucial in creating and sustaining community in informal, everyday ways, particularly through the construction of social networks of visiting and reciprocity (Khanum 1994). In addition, the changing religious, social and economic environment has opened spaces for women to change the cultural environment in their new setting; the role of education for second and third generation women, and of employment for first and second generation (and new migrant) women are important factors that impact broadly on their lives (Kabeer 2000, see also Monica Ali 2004). The role of religion and *izzat* (Samad & Eade 1992) are also important shaping factors, although work suggests that it may impact very differently across generations, with older women being seen as the transmitters of traditional religious values and younger, British born women using religion to open up new spaces and identities for themselves (Begum 2008).

Kabeer's (2000) detailed study of migrant Bangladeshi women and employment in home-working explores many of the complexities of this experience in London and Bangladesh. She notes that while women in the UK are more circumscribed in terms of employment opportunities (structural factors) and community expectations (cultural factors), their role as breadwinners in some cases gives them increased power in the domestic realm. Interestingly, she notes that the smaller and geographically bounded communities in the UK allow for greater levels of surveillance and control of women's activities and movements than in Dhaka; she also notes, however, that account needs to be taken of the wider set of social and familial relations in determining women's agency on an individual basis (for example role of childcare etc). She thus dismisses uncritically religio-culturalist accounts of Bangladeshi women's subjection and exclusion from the labour market. For Kabeer, decisions about work in the London context – 'the power to choose' - are a complex set of personal, familial, cultural and structural negotiations (see also Ali 2004). It is worth reflecting that the low level of formal employment amongst Bangladeshi women has been seen both as a core cause of household poverty and low levels of integration (language skills etc), and a barrier to 'social cohesion', with ramifications for the education

of children etc. This in turn has prompted discussions around marriage practices and new immigration legislation designed at restricting sub-continental marriage (a Bradford MP Anne Cryer, after the 2001 riots, blamed (Pakistani) subcontinental brides for ‘importing poverty’). However, as Kabeer notes, exclusion from the labour market has structural underpinnings based on labour market segmentation, sexism and racism, as well as the changing needs of the global economy (see Gardner 2002). Kabeer also argues that the changing circumstances of Bangladeshi descent young women suggests that there will be dramatic shifts in the experience of work, marriage and family life for the next generation (see also Eade 1997b), although the impact of these shifts on newly arriving migrant women (especially brides) are perhaps even more complex and uncertain.

## ***Generation/Youth***

The issue of generation in the experience of migration and settlement is an additional important factor. Conventionally in British academia, the focus has been primarily on young people – the second or third generation British born – and the shift has been away from the view of young people as being caught ‘Between Two Cultures’ towards a focus on multiple and hybrid identities (see Alexander 2000a, 2006 for a discussion of these approaches, see also Anwar 1998, Mac an Ghaill & Haywood 2005). Work by Eade has focused attention on the experiences of educationally successful Bangladeshi young men and women (1994, 1997a), and has explored the location of British Bengali identity within broader discourses of citizenship and belonging, racial/ethnic, religious and cultural identity, continuity and change. Similarly Gardner & Shakur (1994) have explored the links between young British Bangladeshis and ‘home’, around marriage practices, and the tension between cultural and religious traditions and identities. They point in particular to the emergence of new radical versions of Islamic identities amongst the British born (see also Husain 2007), which they argue provides a sense of pride, collective strength and positive identity, particularly in challenging racialised stereotypes and racist practices (see Keith 2005). Gardner & Shakur argue that this new religiosity does not preclude a strong sense of Bangladeshi identity and nationalist pride. This would suggest that inter-generational division and conflict is not as prominent a feature of Bangladeshi communities as is often suggested, particularly in policy arenas (see also Mac an Ghaill & Haywood 2005). A recent study by Mac an Ghaill & Haywood (2005) of Bangladeshi descent young people in Newcastle has explored their transitions to adulthood and has explored the *local* continuities and differences between Bangladeshi and white young people around issues of education and employment, family and gender, and cultural identities. This study, while very superficial in its analysis and narrow in scope, does point to the need to position Bangladeshi identities in a local context, and as part of wider social structures and representations, including issues of racism. It is also significant in exploring the experiences of Bangladeshi communities in areas with small ethnic minority populations.

Other work, such as Alexander (2000a) and Desai (1999) has focused on the identities of Bangladeshi descent young men, in South London and Camden respectively, and have focused on the intersectionality of ethnicity with gender, age and race, exploring the representation, formation and contestation of identities within public spaces (see also Keith 1995, 2005). There has also been a growing body of work on Asian popular and youth cultural practices (see Sharma, Hutnyk & Sharma 1996). These studies are focused primarily on South Asians as a generic category, though the influence of Tower Hamlets

based Asian Dub Foundation and the Rich Mix Centre has been significant (Sharma 2005, Keith 2005). The emphasis here is on hybrid identities and cultural fusion in diaspora spaces (Ali 2000). However, it is important too to recognise ongoing issues around racism and social problems of educational underachievement, unemployment, crime and drug use amongst young people (Keith 2005, Ali 2000), as well as issues of increased religiosity and attraction to extremist Islamist organisations (Husain 2007).

The experiences of the first generation, older migrants has been a subject of less research, although Gardner's (2002) study of Bengali elders explores the migration narratives of older men and women (see also Ahmed et al 2001, Philipson & Ahmed 2003). She points to the changing relation to migration over the life course, and notes that particularly for first generation men, their perspectives have become less transnational and more conservative with increasing age. She also notes, however, that the *experiences* of these first generation migrants may have been more transnational than the younger generation.

### Issues for further research

Again, questions arise from the review of this literature that may be important for further research:

- 1) An important feature is the overwhelming focus on Tower Hamlets. Very little has been done on Bangladeshi communities outside of East London. Exceptions are Desai's study set in Camden (1999), Alexander's (2000a) study in south London, Khanum's (1994, 2001) study in Manchester and Mac An Ghail & Haywood's (2005) in Newcastle. Barton (1986) conducted a study into Bangladeshis in Bradford and Eade & Garbin (2005, 2006) have done some preliminary interviews in Oldham and Birmingham. However, comparatively little is known about these settled communities, and almost nothing is known about contemporary forms of movement or the dispersal of Bangladeshis across the country.
- 2) This raises important issues about the local specificities of movement and settlement, and about the symbolic role played by Tower Hamlets in Bangladeshi life in the UK in general. Eade describes Tower Hamlets as the Bangladeshi 'heartland' but this status requires further and critical evaluation.
- 3) There are suggestions of important conflicts/contestation over the delineation and defence of symbolic Bengali/Muslim spaces and identities. The role of monuments, of collective cultural and religious festivals and the emergence of a commercialised 'Bangladeshi' identity (for example in the development of Banglatown, or Rich Mix) would need further exploration.
- 4) The focus on generational shifts in political engagement and community identity is significant, although the typology belies what is almost certainly a more complex set of identities, continuities and conflicts (and again seems very specifically related to East London). Very little is known about the 'third generation' and particularly the role of religious organisations, although this is likely to be a politically sensitive area and difficult to research in the current climate. The specificities of the Tower Hamlets situation are important here, and more needs to be known about other areas.
- 5) The above typology overlooks the process of ongoing migration (the 'third generation' are all assumed to be UK born), and little is known about the experiences and

identifications of new migrants and their relationship to the broader Bangladeshi community.

- 6) The issue of gender is one which is crucial to the experience of migration, settlement and identity and needs to be centralised in any research. Comparatively little is known about women, and in particular the private, everyday mechanisms of community formation, identity transmission and household/ family change.
- 7) Issues of age and stage of migration in the life course, along with changing attitudes to migration are also likely to be an important feature of the narratives.
- 8) Issues of the maintenance of links between Bangladesh and UK need to be explored – this might be of particular interest around marriage markets and migration for employment purposes (the issue of irregular migration might occur here).

## Section 4: Policy Issues

This final section explores some of the policy areas affecting the Bangladeshi community in greater detail.

### Education

The majority of research on education which discusses Bangladeshi pupils - one of the largest ethnic minorities attending - focuses on the primary and secondary sector. Statistics show that Bangladeshi pupils are doing less well than the national average at GCSE level and the policy literature has investigated the reasons behind such underachievement. Research suggests that Bangladeshi pupils achieve lower levels of attainment due to certain distinctive features; their culture and religion, language problems, low levels of parental education and a late introduction to the UK education system (see Ofsted, 1999, 2004; Home Affairs Committee, 1986; Department of Education and Skills, 2003). Some more recent studies show that academics are now moving to criticise educational policies and identifying other factors, which may be responsible for both achievement and underachievement in relation to Bangladeshi pupils. These factors are identified in terms of social structure, educational policy, institutional racism and the expectations of teachers (see Haque, 2000; Kalra, 2006; Tomlinson, 1992; Haque and Bell, 2001; Crozier and Davis, 2005).

Although policy literature often highlights ‘family pathology’ as the problem for underachieving Bangladeshi pupils (Tomlinson, 1992), a number of researchers now place responsibility on educational policies due to a ‘one size fits all’ attitude. That is, such policies cannot identify the diversities and differences found amongst ethnic minorities as well as diverse local situations (see Kalra, 2006; Crozier and Davis, 2005). Haque and Bell (2001) point out that the influence of socio-economic conditions or ‘social class’ has not been duly recognised in the research on this issue and that is why there is no adequate explanation that can clarify the differences in attainment levels at secondary level between minority ethnic group pupils. Tomlinson (1992) indicates a tendency of policy-makers to ignore the economic and social structures, which create disadvantage, and to focus on individual or family ‘pathology’ as a major cause of disadvantage (see Tomlinson 1992). Focusing on the Tower Hamlets situation she points to the fact that education policy in the local area was the major reason for the underachievement of Bangladeshi pupils. During the 1980s the London Education Authority was unable to provide sufficient school places for children in Tower Hamlets; 95% of the resulting ‘out-of-school’ children were of

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Bangladeshi origin. As a result of this situation, thousands of children had their education disrupted or severely affected in terms of achievement (Tomlinson, 1992). On the basis of recent statistics Gavron and Dench (2006) note that the schools situation in Tower Hamlets improved greatly during the nineties after the establishment of a number of new schools and changed school policies. During this period, pupils across Tower Hamlets, in all groups, improved their score, but Bangladeshis improved most of all (Gavron and Dench, 2006; Ofsted, 2004).

Wrench and Qureshi (1996) also highlight socio-economic factors in relation to underachievement. They state that there is a danger of over-emphasising the factors of ethnicity and culture without recognising how these interact with socio-economic factors. They place an emphasis on factors such as stereotyping and racism within schools, poverty, poor housing and educational infrastructure which adversely affect academic achievement (Wrench and Qureshi, 1996). Kalra (2006), however, in research into successful Bangladeshi pupils in Manchester, found that the driving force for success was high educational aspirations rather than socio-economic conditions. This was related to the fact that they were well informed about educational opportunities and routes towards success (Kalra, 2006).

The research on the involvement of Bangladeshis in higher education does not compare with the volume of research on the primary or secondary sector. Only a few studies have discussed the overall condition of Bangladeshis in the higher educational sector often including Bangladeshi women as a category of 'South Asian women' (see Bagguley and Hussain, 2007; Dale, 2000). Statistical data shows that only a small number of Bangladeshi people are participating in post-16 education or training, and Bangladeshi adults are less likely to be involved in job-related training (Ofsted, 2004). More recently, Bangladeshi young men and women are increasingly attending university but there are significantly higher rates of application and admission to university for young Bangladeshi men than for women (see Bagguley and Hussain, 2007; Ofsted, 2004). Bagguley and Hussain (2007) say, on the basis of analysing UCAS data, that Bangladeshi women still experience an 'ethnic penalty', whilst both Bangladeshi and Pakistani women experience a 'gender penalty'. They are less likely to be successful in securing a place in the universities than their middle-class Indian and white peers. The researchers argue that it is necessary to overcome assumptions widespread in various communities, schools, universities and amongst employers that South Asian women from certain communities - mainly Bangladeshi and Pakistani - are not serious about higher education. Although they are often encouraged to consider university by their parents, preferably in a local university, it was also often assumed not to be a 'natural progression' for them by their schools. A small minority of teachers assume that education was going to be a waste of time for Bangladeshi women - as part of that "South Asian women" category - since they were destined for marriage and motherhood rather than for careers (Bagguley and Hussain 2007).

## ***Employment***

All the available data shows that Bangladeshis are greatly disadvantaged in terms of employment rates and earnings, which is responsible for the levels of poverty that make this community one of the poorest of all the ethnic groups. A lack of educational qualifications means that Bangladeshis have fewer employment opportunities compared to

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other ethnic groups and are mostly working in low paid jobs (see Platt, 2007). However, more recently, due to increasing educational attainment, younger Bangladeshis are getting better jobs than previous generations (Gavron and Dench, 2006). Similarly, as more Bangladeshi women are receiving higher education their unemployment rate is reducing. They are, however, still much less likely than Indian or White women to obtain professional or managerial employment. Bangladeshi women remain among the most excluded and lowest paid sections of the labour force (Bagguley and Hussain, 2007). The employment rate of Bangladeshi women is very low compared to Bangladeshi men, which could reflect, as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation literature suggests, traditional and religious attitudes of this predominately Muslim community towards women (Clarke and Drinkwater, 2007). The literature also points to religious identity, as a factor in reducing employment opportunities. In addition they may also be paying a penalty for their specific ethnic identity (see Platt, 2007, Modood et al 1997). And as an EOC report of 2007 suggested, ethnic minority women (including Bangladeshi) were three times more likely than white women to be asked at job interviews about their plans for marriage and children illustrating how negative stereotyping can lead to discrimination by employers.

Nesbitt and Neary (2001) find that Bangladeshis are concentrated in a narrow range of sectors. The following sectors, hotels and restaurants, land transport, retail trade, business services, and wholesale trade account for 78 % of Bangladeshis in employment (Clark and Drinkwater, 2007). Over 60% of male Bangladeshi employees and the self-employed worked in the restaurant trade compared to 40% of Chinese males but only 2% of Indian and 1% of white males (Sly *et al*, 1998 in Carey, 2004). Of the 9,500 Indian and Bangladeshi restaurants and takeaways in the UK - employing over 72,000 personnel (more than the coal, steel and shipbuilding industries combined) and with an annual turnover of some £2.3 billion - approximately 85% are exclusively owned by Bangladeshis (Carey, 2004). However, in the early years of Bangladeshi settlement in the UK, most worked in the garment trade, especially in London, or on the railways, and a large number of people were also working in factories in the North and the Midlands (Glynn, 2006). However, after the decline of the garment trade in the UK, many became involved in the restaurant business. The expanding restaurant business also provided an important 'stepping-stone' for many new and older immigrants. This has also played a role in dispersing Bangladeshis to all over the U.K. (Glynn, 2006).

## **Housing**

Housing issues remain one of the key problems for migrant communities (Beresford, 2007) and are crucial in terms of race relations as well as in the processes that lead to 'ghettoisation' (Glynn, 2005). This is especially true if there is evidence of systematic discrimination against ethnic minorities. Bangladeshis have faced repeated discrimination in the case of housing (Bunting 2007), confronting acute problems all over the UK (see Glynn, 2005, 2006; Gavron and Dench, 2006; PSI, 1999; Cameron and Field, 2000; Chahal, 2000). Data shows that Bangladeshis have twice as many people per room compared to white households, regardless of the size of their property (PSI, 1999). The situation appears most acute for Bangladeshis living in Tower Hamlets (Gavron and Dench, 2006; PSI, 1999).

Glynn (2006) discusses the historical context for the housing problems in East London. In the 1970s and 1980s new migrants arrived in East London both from other parts of the UK

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and Bangladesh. From Bangladesh it was mainly wives and children who were joining their husbands/fathers and others moved down from the recession-hit towns of the north (Glynn, 2005; 2006). The housing needs of the new immigrants thus created competition with the white working class. Dench et al (2006) assert that local housing policy, especially the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, which prioritised those in greatest need rather than long term residents, benefited Bangladeshi people, leaving the white working class resentful and contributing to the rise of racism in Tower Hamlets throughout the 80s and 90s. This assertion has been strongly contested (see Glynn, 2006; Bunting, 2007). Glynn (2006) says the crucial issue, which the book, *The New East End*, does not discuss, is that the problem is not the prioritising of those in greatest need, but chronic under-investment in public housing, which has meant that those in greatest need can only be helped at the expense of those only a little better off. Bunting refers to Mark Adams, one of the housing officers in Tower Hamlets throughout much of the 80s and 90s, who also disputes Dench et al (2006) in their analysis of housing policy. Adams says that during the 80s and early 90s repeated investigations into the issue reveal the fact that there was systematic discrimination in housing policy *against* Bangladeshis. The council did not apply the criterion of greatest need and repeatedly discriminated against Bangladeshis in favour of whites (Bunting, 2007).

Glynn (2006) also notes that the issue of housing has been used in a political fashion throughout the 80s and 90s by all the major political parties (Glynn, 2006). She also argues that although the 'battle' centring on housing issues has created 'ghettos', it has empowered and organised Bangladeshis (Glynn, 2005). Initially the movement for housing was very much influenced by radical politics, but the Bangladeshis involved did not stick with the original politicised approach. However, it did result in creating a basis for leadership in the community. Those who were involved in the housing movement in the 70s or 80s are now in leading positions in the council and the community (Glynn, 2005; 2006).

Cameron and Field (2000) in their study in Newcastle found that the Bangladeshi population experienced exclusion from housing, and that their housing options were limited by a combination of low income and fear of crime and harassment. The Policy Study Institute's study on housing also found that Bangladeshis are reluctant to move from their 'ghettos' because of a fear of racism (PSI, 1999). However, according to PSI (1999) the housing problem lies in that trend in Britain towards a greater number of smaller households as young people leave home at an earlier age and larger numbers of marriages break down. Due to this situation, Bangladeshi communities, where the extended family remains strong, find that their need for larger homes cannot be met.

## **Poverty**

The rates of income poverty are highest among Bangladeshis (see Palmer and Kenway, 2007; Platt, 2007, Berthoud 1997). Palmer and Kenway (2007) suggest that minority ethnic groups suffer income poverty due to three major factors; differences in age, family type and family work status. Of these, family work status affects Bangladeshis most. This is because of the fact that workless families are generally much more at risk of income poverty than working families and because of the higher proportion of working age adults not in paid work in the Bangladeshi community. Platt (2007) argues that different factors such as education, household size, rate of pay and ethnicity have a cumulative effect on poverty issues. Lack of education has squeezed job opportunities, including professional

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jobs, which means Bangladeshis work in low paid jobs. This means that both in-work and out of work Bangladeshi households face a higher risk of poverty. Additionally, the higher number of family members means higher demands on available income, which puts the family at a greater risk of deprivation. Bangladeshi children are acutely affected with over 60% of them living in poverty. Furthermore, the fact that Bangladeshi families also appear to have higher rates of sickness and disability also puts families under pressure (see Platt 2007).

## **Health**

There is a significant amount of research on the health issues of Bangladeshi patients, which focus on a number of areas; health care services, psychiatry, diabetes, blood pressure, dental care, cancer, and child care. Due to the volume of research on these issues, and the technical aspects of it, this section will only focus on the accessibility of healthcare services for Bangladeshi patients. People of Bangladeshi origin in the UK appear to have poorer health and poorer healthcare than other sections of the community (Rhodes and Nocon, 2003). Consequently they need greater access to the health services. A number of research studies, however, show that Bangladeshis are not using the healthcare services to best advantage due to a number of factors; lack of awareness of the healthcare services, lack of communication skills, a basic language barrier for the elderly population and a lack of understanding of the many problems involved (see Rhodes, Nocon and Wright, 2003; Rhodes and Nocon, 2003; Jayaweera, D'Souza and Garcia, 2004).

Although there is a renewed emphasis in UK healthcare policy on access to services, there have been few initiatives concerning possible inequalities in access for people from different ethnic backgrounds (Rhodes, Nocon, and Wright, 2003). Jayaweera et al (2004) have studied childbearing Bangladeshi women in Leeds and found that the women's constrained material circumstances limit their access to resources, services and good health. This is related to their limited educational qualifications and a lack of fluency in English. Rhodes and Nocon (2003) identify problems of communication between patients and healthcare services staff. They find that, although communication with medical and nursing staff has long been recognised as key to providing effective health care services, efforts to overcome communication problems have often been minimal. They note that many practitioners and patients rely on informal interpreters, usually family members, to assist despite the shortcomings of such arrangements. The provision of a formal interpreting service for Bangladeshis is poor, which works as a hindrance to good healthcare service.

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