

Class and Ethnicity in a Globalising City

Bangladeshis and Contested Urban Space in London's 'East End'

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The recent focus on the global flows of capital, information, ideas and people and their implications for nation-state institutions (see, for example, Robertson 1992; Hall 1992; Lash & Urry 1994; Castells 1996, 1997) has highlighted the role played by different kinds of travellers, such as tourists, poor migrant workers and corporate elites. 'Globalisation' appears to challenge policies based around the nation-state since its boundaries cannot control these global flows. Indeed, national governments in W. Europe have adapted their welfare state provisions in response to what they perceive as 'globalisation' (Sykes, Palier & Prior 2001). A number of cities in the European region are now heavily involved in competing with each other to attract footloose global capital through their financial and business services and their success provides further evidence of the nation-state's limitations.

London is a prime example of these developments. Indeed, Saskia Sassen in her book, *The Global City* (1991), reinforced by her subsequent writings and her research collaboration with the Globalization and World Cities Network based at Loughborough University, has sought to establish the credentials of London, together with New York and Tokyo, as a dominant site for footloose global capital in a hierarchy of cities around the world. She detected the emergence of a new urban spatial order during the 1970s and 1980s through the massive expansion of financial and business corporations, high technology industries, information and media services. This new order was defined by a socio-economic polarisation between the extremely

wealthy members of the business and financial elites, on the one hand, and the lowly paid providers of services to these elites on the other. Many of these lowly paid workers in London and New York were recent immigrants who were creating minority ethnic enclaves sometimes in close proximity to wealthy neighbourhoods and 'gated communities'.

The global city thesis has several limitations. Firstly, as Marcuse and van Kempen (2000) point out, the global city label suggests that a few places have reached the specific state of being global, thereby directing attention away from the more important phenomenon of globalisation as a process and its varying impact on all cities around the world. London, therefore, is only a particular example of how cities, generally, are shaped by changing patterns of global capital. Secondly, these globalising cities are not the sites for a new spatial order – rather they are places where earlier trends are reinforced in diverse ways around the world. In other words, the history of global capitalism is crucial to our understanding of contemporary globalisation, globalising cities and the interplay between global and local processes. Thirdly, several commentators have convincingly claimed that the emergence of global cities is not confined to a certain elite (see Smith 2002). In the UK, for example, political and economic elites in former industrial cities beyond London have pursued 'development' schemes, which have many of the characteristics associated with global cities (see Peck & Ward 2002). Fourthly, as Samers argues in a fine review of the global city debate, Sassen's emphasis on economic

polarisation between global elites and those at the opposite end of the class structure ignores the crucial issue of social mobility as members of minority ethnic groups move up the ladder (2002:394).

This debate shows us that economic class still informs social inequalities as global/local processes transform urban life. At the same time, the Weberian tradition reminds us that there is no straightforward relationship between economic class and social status. Hierarchies of power and prestige are deeply influenced by economic markets but the latter do not mechanically determine these hierarchies. If we look at the understandings people give their social situations, we see a complex interweaving of narratives where class distinctions and class solidarities jostle with other discriminations and loyalties. People's lives in London are shaped, therefore, not by a single agent – global capital – but by the interweaving of class and ethnic processes operating transnationally from above and below producing a complex world of multiple identities, imagined communities and transnational social movements (Smith 2001:188f). The relationship between economic class and social status is being reconfigured as people's lives are changed by new global/local dynamics. To understand such a situation we should use an analysis, which combines a structural, political economy perspective with postmodern sensitivities towards contingency, hybridity and emergent social and cultural identities.

London's 'East End': Class, Ethnicity and Local/Global Processes

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries the rapid expansion of London's 'East End' saw the emergence of a self-conscious working class, as lower middle class clerks, supervisors and small businessmen moved further out into the expanding suburbs. A sharp social and economic boundary also separated this working class East End from the City of London's merchants and the aristocratic and upper middle class quarters in the West End. Although East London's working class neighbourhoods may have appeared at

first sight to be homogeneous, they were riven by ethnic and racial differences as people arrived from the surrounding countryside, from other parts of Britain, from Ireland and from Eastern Europe.

Until the 1970s the local working class relied heavily on the Victorian industrial belt stretching round the City of London to the north and south, as well as the docks and their associated services. This mixture of manufacturing and dock enterprise linked the East End to the national economy and to a global economy shaped by colonialism. A distinctively working class culture was reflected in the rhythms of work and leisure. These occupational and cultural forces informed and were, in turn, shaped by the political changes of the early 20th century where the municipal socialism of the Labour Party was challenged by Communist, Ratepayer, Conservative and Far Right organisations (see Fishman 1988; Glynn 2000). After the Second World War the Labour Party established an almost undisputed position in response to local social restructuring, the physical rebuilding of neighbourhoods and global political developments such as the emerging 'Cold War'.

Working class communities had been severely disrupted by the 1940 'blitz' and subsequent rehousing. The development of 'new towns' beyond London after 1945 further weakened the working class in Tower Hamlets since they heavily recruited local skilled workers. However, the most decisive blow was delivered by the closing of the docks and their associated services during the 1970s and early 1980s. The establishment of the London Docklands Development Corporation in 1981 by the new Conservative national government initiated the restructuring of the dock neighbourhoods for high technology enterprises and business and financial services relocating from the City of London. A new workforce was drawn to 'Docklands' – middle class commuters and settlers occupying new private housing – while the old white working class continued to decline as its younger members continued to move out to the suburbs and new towns.

The restructuring of the global economy combined with national politics to produce a

new urban landscape where those profiting from global flows of capital, technology and information now lived close to the remnants of the former industrial world. The old working class communities and the new middle class settlers are not homogeneous, of course. Differences of occupation and skill overlapped with ethnic and racial solidarities. Before 1939 dock labour was recruited predominantly from English and Irish families while Jewish settlers from Russia and Poland dominated the garment industry. Those employed in high technology enterprises and the finance and business services of 'Docklands' are largely white English newcomers. At the topmost levels of the finance and business services are the more transitory members of the global elites who are drawn from diverse nations, especially those in North America, the European Union and the Pacific Rim.

Other newcomers were Bangladeshi settlers who were employed mostly in manual jobs across the industrial and service sectors. A few, however, had entered white collar jobs in education, local government, welfare and social services and the professions. While their life chances were conditioned by their structural class position through jobs in education, local government, welfare and social services and the professions, their social identities were also shaped by ethnic differences based on continuing links with their country of origin and Islam. This interplay between class and ethnic identities was reflected in local political struggles where secularist and Islamist factions supported competing uses of local urban space (see Eade & Garbin 2001; Eade, Fremeaux & Garbin 2002).

Secularists, Islamists and Contested Local Space

The juxtaposition of new forms of socio-economic division with remnants of the old industrial order is clearly visible in Tower Hamlets. The gleaming high-rise buildings of Canary Wharf at the heart of Docklands overlook the mean streets and dilapidated council estates to the north occupied by Bangladeshis and white working class survivors. The contrast between

rich and poor in a borough so visibly shaped by global flows of capital, goods, people and information is a fertile ground for those who want to criticise the excesses of global capitalism. During the 1980s criticism in the localities dominated by Bangladeshis emphasised class divisions and class conflict but, more recently, these secular, socialist interpretations have been challenged by Islamists based at the East London Mosque, in particular. As a very large third generation of 'Cockney Bengalis' emerges with little prospect of gaining access to the new jobs, amenities and housing available in 'Docklands' or even jobs in the overcrowded ethnic enclave, the more attractive appear to be the Islamist critiques of western economic and political systems. Bangladeshi Labour councillors and other secularists have been forced onto the defensive since their policies appear to have made scant impact on the local ills of unemployment, drugs and petty crime. Islamist calls for the moral regeneration of Bangladeshi youth can also be linked both to political struggles between secular nationalists and Islamists within Muslim-majority Bangladesh and to issues confronting other Muslims around the world, especially those bound up with British involvement in Iraq (see Abbas 2005).

Secular Nationalists and the Bengali New Year Celebration

These different understandings were vividly illustrated in recent debates concerning the celebration of Bengali New Year (*Baishakhi mela*). The *mela* had been introduced in 1998 as a multicultural event financed by Cityside, a government-funded quango which promoted community arts in Tower Hamlets' western wards bordering the City of London. The *mela* was held in the Spitalfields – the heartland of the Bangladeshi settlement – and provided entertainment, which was intended to express the rich diversity of Bengali culture. Since music and dancing was frowned on by 'strict' Muslims, the organisers were careful not to offend the London Great Mosque on Brick Lane by noisy celebrations during prayer times.

The ideological significance of the New Year festival with regard to inequality and social

justice was clearly presented in a guide for schools written by a Bangladeshi community group. The festival was associated with the Bangladesh countryside which, in turn, represented society as a whole:

“[t]he celebration of the Bangla New Year reveals the Soul of Bangladesh and pronounces the truth about the people and the country. [It] is free from class and caste...and is in the care of the entire society” (Khan 1990:115 quoted in Eade, Fremeaux & Garbin 2002:168).

This joyful mingling of a nation, united beyond the boundaries of social difference, also stretched implicitly across national borders to embrace a transnational Bangladeshi community around the globe. The festival reminded British Bangladeshis of the cultural heritage, which they shared with their compatriots elsewhere, but it also encouraged them to behave in an egalitarian manner free from the inequalities of caste and class – not only with other Bangladeshis but with all human beings.

We see here a utopian vision of a national community which implicitly reaches beyond Bangladesh to a transnational diaspora. This vision helped to establish a common platform between Bangladeshi secular nationalists and white secularists who dominate British state institutions at central and local levels. The New Year celebrations were also linked to other local multicultural events, which were shaped by an equally secular vision of a liberal multicultural locality. The 2001 advert for the event, distributed through the internet by a virtual community of British Bangladeshi professionals, for example, makes clear that the Brick Lane Festival placed Bangladeshis within a wider history of immigration and a contemporary mixture of cultural influences (see overleaf).

These two events were publicly funded on the grounds that they contributed to the multicultural character of the locality and to Tower Hamlets generally. This vision of a secular, liberal society, shaped by cultural mixture, was not shared by Islamist groups. These groups were

encouraged, ironically, by secularist members of the central and local state, who wished to harness the resources of ‘faith communities’ in the delivery of policy issues. As Greg Smith points out in his provocatively titled article on similar developments in the neighbouring borough of Newham – “East London is no longer secular: religion as a source of social capital in the regeneration of East London” (2001) – local religious diversity provides a resource on which, since 1992, central government institutions have sought to draw. More recently, the Social Exclusion Unit attached to the Cabinet Office and the Home Office’s Active Community Unit have discussed self-help in the following terms:

“Funders should recognise that faith groups may well be the most suitable voluntary and community organisations to deliver general community objectives and should be prepared to provide sustained financial support for this, learn with and from one another” (quoted in Smith 2001:147).

The ethnic and cultural diversity of ‘faith communities’ was acknowledged, as well as evidence that ‘[s]ome parts of communities are as disaffected from faith communities as they are from mainstream society’. However, the consultation paper argued that these factors did not ‘minimise the enormous potential contribution which faith organisations can make to community self-help’ (2001:147).

Local state officials were not so eager to recognise these ‘faith communities’ but, in Tower Hamlets, the purpose-built East London Mosque (ELM) had long been active in building alliances with local officials despite opposition from some secular Bangladeshis activists at least. Benefitting from the Brick Lane Mosque’s refusal to engage directly with public organisations, the ELM’s leaders presented themselves as members of the area’s ‘central mosque’, encouraging outsiders to visit the mosque, providing help with local community schemes and generating finance to build an adjoining community centre.

Their position was further strengthened

after the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 by media reports, which focussed on the mosque together with the more controversial centres in Finsbury Park and Shepherd's Bush (Garbin 2001:191). In a report on the ELM's role in cutting truancy within Tower Hamlets, *The Guardian* (August 2, 2002) applauded its determination to avoid "fomenting fundamentalism" and to "live in harmony with the wider non-Muslim community". According to the ELM's 'Director', the mosque "isn't just about praying... We want to see the well-being of our community, see children get their basic education and local schools perform better". The mosque's impact on local truancy was 'one of a range of progressive schemes at the mosque, including discouraging the practice of forced marriage and working with youngsters on issues of drugs and gangs'. The scheme was supported by public funds given to deprived local authorities and the local 'regeneration and external funding manager' welcomed the initiative on the grounds that 'conventional approaches ..., such as home-school liaison workers and informing parents about the importance of attendance had not worked'. On the strength of this success the ELM leaders were going to explain 'how the scheme works to the Council of Mosques' in the hope that it might be adopted 'by other LEAs with substantial Muslim communities and truancy problems' (ibid.).

Members of the ELM management committee and the associated Young Muslim Organisation vigorously opposed the Bengali New Year festival and similar 'multicultural' events. Against the high-minded vision of an egalitarian national/transnational community the ELM's *imam* developed the vision of a pure Islamic local/global community. He argued that the festival was an unIslamic event which would only lead young Bangladeshis astray. A properly Islamic celebration was required which would help to counter the locality's socio-economic problems:

"Drugs, alcohol and the gang-fighting and all the other wrong things... unemployment and [the] unhealthy housing situation and the cultural gap between the older and the younger

generation. Families are suffering. Marriages are breaking" (Interview with *Imam* of the East London Mosque, 2000, quoted in Eade, Fremeaux & Garbin 2002:168).

The imam proceeded to argue that the festival was promoted in both Bangladesh and Britain by a secular minority, whose enjoyment of fun diverted them from Islam:

"In Bangladesh they don't exercise... like this... [only a minority]... There is a secular trend and there are people who are purely having their own understanding about community, about culture... This was the culture of the Hindus... Nowadays some people are getting very much influenced by some other faith – that's why those people are away from Islam. They look for something fun – whatever it is, which culture, which religion – no matter" (Interview with *Imam* of the East London Mosque, 2000, quoted in Eade, Fremeaux & Garbin 2002:168).

This portrait of the new 'East End' clearly resonates with earlier constructions of London's dark 'Other' but the communities visualised are different. In Islamist discourse local Muslims are part of a global community (*umma*), which can be redeemed through the 'correct' observance of Islamic practices.

This interpretation of a global Muslim community defied Western ideological assertions about the primacy of secular culture in 'modern' nation-states. Indeed, in the *imam's* opinion, attempts by 'modernising' elites in Bangladesh to introduce secular nationalism were bound to fail because of the ways in which religion permeated everyday beliefs and practices. The efforts of the secular minority only resulted in the spread of Hinduism rather than secular nationalism. In other words, Bangladeshis could not escape the continuing struggle between Hindu and Muslim communities, which had determined politics in the Indian sub-continent through the partition of British India in 1946, the conflicts between India and Pakistan, and the tensions between India and Bangladesh after the latter's creation in 1971. However, what this deterministic vision

failed to acknowledge, of course, was the role of both non-religious forces and contingency in this politics of identity. These conflicts were not inevitable and unchanging and what caused them could not be reduced to religious forces.

In spite of the tendency to present sharply contrasting visions of Islamic and secular communities, secularists and Islamists do not constitute homogeneous constituencies nor are they relentlessly opposed to one another. Not surprisingly, perhaps, individuals work pragmatically across ideological boundaries. ELM leaders forge alliances with white secularist officials in areas of common interests, while some Bangladeshi secularists are happy to work with particular Islamist leaders against their mutual opponents. A few secularists have rejected Islam as both a mode of practice and a set of beliefs but many more observe in various ways Muslim public practices, refusing to accept that Islam in Britain should be confined to the private realm of belief and domestic practice. Likewise, then term 'Islamism' covers a wide range of beliefs and practices which, in the political realm, are expressed in the differences between moderate and more radical groups such as *Al Mjujahirun* over how to pressurise the British government over its continued involvement in Iraq.

These pragmatic alliances are shaped by the competition for public funds. Since secularist Bangladeshis enjoy a far stronger position within local state institutions than those associated with the local mosques. They have been appointed to white collar jobs in the public sector, such as the National Health Service, education and the borough council. Secularists control the vast majority of community groups, clubs and law centres providing advice to Bangladeshi residents about how to gain access to welfare resources or leisure facilities to the third generation. They also dominate the various housing cooperatives, which became increasingly important during the 1990s as the borough council's housing role declined. Islamists are limited in their range of possible allies if they want to insist on the binary opposition between secularism and Islam. In practice, then, moderate Islamists have also sought to build alliances with non-Muslims involved in the distribution

of public funds rather than remain within a narrowly defined Muslim enclave.

Consensus between these potential competitors for scarce material resources can be generated, however, through the language of community which emphasises the struggle by the 'community' against local economic and social problems. When Bangladeshi activists create such a consensus, they are applauded by white officials. When they frequently disagree among themselves about who should receive the funding (in ways which do not correspond to secularist/Islamist distinctions), the paternalism and sometimes implicit racialism of white official attitudes is exposed in their criticism of Bangladeshi factionalism (see Fremeaux 2002).

Ethnicity, Class and the Local Impact of the Changing Global Economy

Tower Hamlets

These debates concerning community have a common focus – ethnicity. Secularists emphasise the ethnic boundaries between themselves and others shaped by language and the cultural heritage of their country of origin. Islamists are preoccupied with another ethnic boundary defined by religion. This focus on ethnicity is encouraged by outside funders, who want to celebrate 'multiculturalism' based on popular culture where ethnic communities could also express their 'unity in diversity'. In multicultural terms, Spitalfields is more than a British Bangladeshi heartland – it is a 'rich mix of communities both past and present' (see 2001 advert above). This emphasis on community as ethnicity is further strengthened by government support for 'faith communities'.

The effect of this interpretation of community is to direct attention away from issues of political economy and the local social divisions created by the changing global economy. Structurally the lives of Tower Hamlets' residents have been dramatically altered by the demise of local industries, the docks and their associated services but community representatives, government officials and 'development agencies' have usually avoided interpreting these dramatic changes

in terms of class. Some Labour councillors and radical activists still emphasise the role played by class in the local social divisions created by global forces (see Jacobs 1996), but they appear to be increasingly out of touch with central government initiatives and the policies pursued by their own local government officials.

The shift in emphasis from class to ethnic interpretations of local society during the late 1980s and the 1990s is partly a reflection of political changes, of course. Conservative government claims that Britain was becoming a meritocratic, classless society in the 1980s have made some impact on popular understandings, while New Labour's insistence on community, consensus and 'third way' solutions to persistent national problems has also contributed. There are also many local factors at work. The decline of the old working class neighbourhoods has clearly been one major factor. Some of these neighbourhoods still survive outside the localities occupied by Bangladeshis and other minority ethnic settlers, as well as in Docklands. However, their post-Second World War political hegemony has been broken and they have to compete with others for such scarce resources as jobs, housing, health and welfare services on the basis of ethnicity. The Labour Party's recruitment of Bangladeshi activists and 'anti-racist' policies during the 1980s confirmed the ethnic terrain on which such competition had to be waged and led to a significant white working class backlash to the electoral benefit of the Liberal Democrats.

Competition on the basis of ethnicity has also been encouraged by the rapid expansion of Bangladeshi settlement in Tower Hamlets. Bangladeshi activists found it easier to mobilise support through appeals to cultural and religious traditions rather than class, especially after the demise of the radicalised Greater London Council and Inner London Education Authority in the mid-1980s. The manifold differences of income, education, language, status and village background could be minimised through an emphasis on what people shared as Bangladeshis. The availability of funds from Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and South Asia also encouraged mobilisation on

the basis of Islam; here people could unite not only on the basis of their ethnic ties as Bangladeshis but also across ethnic and economic divisions as Muslims.

People's awareness of their ethnic community ties is also encouraged by the heavy dependence on the ethnic enclave socially and economically. Tower Hamlets' western wards provided housing, jobs, education, information, social support and other resources for most Bangladeshis in the borough and even further afield. A few people from the second generation have broken out of this enclave into jobs and localities dominated by white people, but the paucity of their numbers indicate how difficult this is to achieve. The very large third generation is going to come on to the job market in the next ten years but many will still compete for jobs in an already overcrowded ethnic enclave economy.

Bangladesh

These factors go a long way to explaining why secularists and Islamists have paid scant attention to the dramatic gulf between Docklands and their own neighbourhoods. Docklands is not a place where they can successfully compete for scarce resources, whereas they can call on a wide range of economic, social, cultural and political links elsewhere. Another factor has also to be considered – the continuing links with Bangladesh. These links are forged by the changes in this country's political economy and cultural life as people engage locally with global flows of capital, people, goods and information.

Migration from Bangladesh to Britain was, not surprisingly, bound up with changes in global capitalism as colonial regimes collapsed after the Second World War. The first Bangladeshis to arrive in London had worked in British-owned ships as *lascars* during the colonial period. Although most settlers arrived after the break-up of the Indian Empire, they exploited links already forged with Britain during the colonial period. However, Bangladeshi migrants have also found work in other countries during the last thirty years, especially the oil-rich Muslim countries of the Middle East, while others have settled in European Union countries as well as in North America.

In Britain the vast majority of Bangladeshis come from one particular district – Sylhet – and from clusters of villages within that district. The local economic class structure shaped the pattern of chain migration to Britain as individuals raised the money needed for the journey from their families' position within the system of rural landholding. As Katy Gardner points out in her pioneering study of this process, the distinction between different forms of capital is required in order to understand a highly dynamic situation. Overseas migration:

“provides both economic and symbolic capital; being a migrant can command as much as social and economic power as owning land. It is not simply that migration generates valuable remittances; it also brings social prestige, knowledge, the ‘cultural capital’ of having been abroad, and the ability to be a patron” (Gardner 1995:130).

Although economic and symbolic capital are closely linked, the economic class structure does not determine the hierarchies of status and power in any mechanistic way. In the village where she undertook her research:

“status and power operate on many different levels and take many different forms. Often they are associated with economic class and economic capital but not always. Since status is never more than the way in which people perceive each other, it is never fixed, but continually changing” (1995:134).

The migrants' Muslim background played a key role in this dynamic situation since poor people could acquire high status through the public expression of their religious commitment. At the same time those prospering through migration could signify their distinction from their poorer co-religionists by subscribing to the beliefs and practices of a ‘pure’ Islam. They engaged with the revivalist teachings of Islamists who sought to eliminate the mystical, syncretic traditions associated with local saint cults (‘pirism’) and supported by poorer families in Sylhet (Gardner 1995:chap. 8). The transnational networks, emergent identities

and multiple homes created through migration to Britain and elsewhere is clearly bound up with global debates concerning the essential features of Islam – a local/global process which operates within both Sylhet and Tower Hamlets and links the two locales together.

Ethnicity, Class and Transnational Links: Changing Patterns of Marriage in Tower Hamlets

Some insight into this dynamic situation of transnational links and multiple hierarchies can be gleaned from a recent study on marriage choices (Samad & Eade 2002). The study was commissioned by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to examine the issue of forced marriage through a comparison between Pakistanis in Bradford and Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets. Meetings were held with twenty focus groups in each area. The groups were recruited on the basis of age, gender and class and the discussions were led by two Bangladeshi researchers (one male, one female) in English, Sylheti and standard Bengali.

While the aim of the research was to elicit people's views concerning forced marriage, the discussions considered the issue of marriage in general and a lot of time was given to the changing character of arranged marriage – the most common procedure within both communities. Implicit in any examination of how a particular group reproduced itself was the respective roles played by economic class, social status and political power. At the same time the diverse strategies pursued by British Asians were also influenced by outsiders, especially state institutions. The forced marriage issue highlighted the British government's involvement through immigration controls and the suggestion by the former Home Secretary, David Blunkett, that British Asians should abandon recruiting partners from their countries of origin.

A prime theme of the discussions was the future of arranged marriage in the British context. Demographic factors loomed large here since the Bangladeshi population was very young and in the next ten years a vast wave of third generation British Bangladeshis was

going to hit the marriage market. Inevitably people debated the advantages and disadvantages of continuing to recruit partners from their country of origin. Frequent allusions to the 'generation gap' between older and younger British Asians were simplistic but generational differences did seem to influence people's views about transnational alliances. Bangladeshi male and female elders supported such alliances on the grounds that they strengthened family ties and reinvigorated cultural norms among their children. At the same time some elders noted the linguistic tensions inherent within such alliances. These tensions could become serious if individuals are unwilling to cope. As one elder explained, if a young woman brought up in Tower Hamlets married someone raised in Bangladesh:

"She'll speak English and he Bengali, so they'll have problems with language. Some will cope all right thinking they've no choice but others will not think like that" (Samad & Eade 2002:79).

Young Bangladeshis were even more adamant that satisfaction in a relationship depended on communication:

"The girl needs someone on her...wavelength. Someone she can interact with. She cannot spend the rest of her life with this person who can't even speak English" (2002:80).

Knowledge of English was closely related to both educational achievement and individual choice. As one young Bangladeshi student explained when comparing his parents' generation with what could happen to him:

"[People considered] where the partner's family was from, how wealthy they were, what was their caste background. My own wedding – the categories will be far more lengthy...It won't necessarily be just looking at status. I personally have my own preferences and I believe...that I can have these" (2002:82).

These comments about language, education and choice seem to indicate that the system of arranged marriages within patrilineal groups (*gusthi*) is being modified by settlement within London. However, one elder warned against any simplistic contrast between a changing Britain and a traditional Bangladesh:

"In Bangladesh changes are taking place, Previously...a hundred per cent was arranged marriage...Now it is increasing – ways other than arranged marriages; marrying according to individual wishes" (unpublished transcript, 2001).

So the key issue seems to be the ways in which settlement in Britain has affected the ability of families to maintain the caste-like divisions (*zat* or *jaat*) between patrilineages evident in rural Sylhet. The interviews did not explore this issue deeply but one elderly male contributor acknowledged the existence of a status hierarchy based on *jaat*:

"*Jaat* means someone is Choudhury, someone is Khan, someone is Talukder, someone is a Pir, someone is a Ghulam" (unpublished transcript, 2001).

Marriage between higher and lower *jaat* would cause problems. For example:

"[If] someone who sell scent [arranges] marriage to a person who sell fish [this] would not be right, because there will be problem in the future. There will be no balance in life because of this in relation to marriage. There has to be similarities on both sides" (unpublished transcript, 2001).

However, another elderly participant noted the familiar process of upward mobility where success in the economic class structure frees people from their low status:

"Today maybe...I have money. I have started a business – prior to that I might have been working in an office. I have changed this profession. Two days later I have not recognition

as a fisherman. Then I can become a relative of an owner of [a] five star hotel – when my living standard goes up, when I have gained qualifications. When I become highly qualified then I would want my children’s in-laws to be more qualified” (unpublished transcript, 2001).

Class is implicit in this contribution but, as in other discussions of social difference, class as a category was rarely used. Interestingly, when a young male student referred to class he associated class with *zat*:

“Some people are rich and some are poor. If a girl’s going into a low class family than their children cannot get married to high class people. The Bengali word for class is *zat*” (unpublished transcript, 2000).

On the other hand, another male student did detect a difference between achieved and ascribed status, which could be linked to analytical distinctions between class and *zat*:

“Status? It’s kind of ambiguous but meaning someone with money, someone with qualifications. Not status as in status given by, maybe, a handful of people – Bangladeshi elders” (unpublished transcript, 2000).

When the issue of Islam in arranged marriage was raised generational difference did appear to play a significant part. Older contributors were more inclined to see an interweaving of both cultural and religious factors. The elder, who earlier explained the differences between those selling scent and fish, justified the gulf in terms of Islam. Other considerations were also described as Islamic:

“Before marriage Islam says that you look at three things. First, religion. A person may be bad but the religion controls them. Second one is beauty and the third is wealth” (unpublished transcript, 2001).

Another elder attached great importance to the ethical behaviour of the young man:

“Only Muslim by name is not sufficient. One has to look at their ethical side. What is he like about his behaviour?”

Furthermore, the ideal partner should be close culturally and physically:

“When I arranged my sister’s marriage, my daughter’s marriage I visit them every week. But if I had arranged their marriage to [another] Muslim – a Saudi Muslim – I may visit because of my daughter but my wife or any other relative will feel very distant because they cannot talk to them. Language problem, cultural gap. There are many gaps. This marriage will not last for long.”

Younger focus group participants were more inclined to distinguish between religion and culture and to entertain the idea that they could marry anyone as long as he or she was a ‘good Muslim’. During a meeting with female students at a local F.E. college, for example, one of the contributors argued that devout parents would not object to their daughters choosing a non-Bangladeshi Muslim:

“If the family is properly religious – yeh? – they wouldn’t care whether he was white or black as long as he was Muslim...But for some people it does matter – the cultural people...They get religion and culture mixed up – that’s what leads to forced marriages and unwanted marriages” (unpublished transcript, 2000).

Other young participants were not so sure that religion and culture could be so easily distinguished in practice. As one of a mixed group of Bangladeshis aged between 16 and 21 explained:

“A girl can only marry another Muslim but a boy can marry someone from another religion. It depends on the family. The preference will be Bangladeshi, then another Muslim but this may cause problems. There could be confusion between culture and religion” (unpublished transcript, 2000).

The local debate about social dislocation found its way into these discussions. One of the Graduate Forum male contributors explained how forced marriage could be an index of such dislocation and parental attempts to control their daughters:

“If the girl go to different culture or something – say someone from Western culture or from [a] different background – [this would be] really frustrating to the community. For instance, if she got pregnant or something. It is very stigmatising...She should have known. She should have respected her parents’ wishes as well. She shouldn’t have a kid...She shouldn’t be having drinks...drugs as well” (unpublished transcript, 2000).

Conclusion

This paper has focussed on an area of London, which has been dramatically transformed through the redevelopment of the old dockland neighbourhoods and the settlement of Bangladeshi workers. This transformation appears to confirm a main theme in Saskia Sassen’s global city hypothesis – the socio-economic polarisation between global elites and those in the lower levels of the service sector. However, what is so striking about Tower Hamlets is the extent to which Bangladeshi settlers ignore the intrusion of these globalising forces, even though these forces are changing the landscape in which they live.

The debates about the use of public space and the issue of marriage suggest some reasons why the transformation has attracted scant interest among these global migrants. Bangladeshis understandably focus on what they can control and alter. The celebration of the Bengali New Year is a public event which they can shape in different ways and which is supported by outside funders. Marriage is a quintessential collective enterprise, which lies at the heart of debates about generation, gender and prestige. Both are bound up with how Bangladeshis can maintain and strengthen their presence in particular neighbourhoods where they can also find work and can relax. In other words,

we see clearly the operation of an ethnic enclave sustained by the overlapping of cultural, social, political and economic processes.

The political-economy approach adopted by Sassen needs to be balanced, therefore, by careful attention to ethnicity. This is particularly important when addressing the issue of social mobility. Although our evidence does not provide any insight to the degree of social mobility among Bangladeshi settlers, it is clear that any movement across the economic class system will be shaped by notions of social prestige carried over from their country of origin. Most Bangladeshis can be described as ‘working class’ by virtue of their position within a local economy drastically affected by the global flows of capital, people and information but their notions of prestige are still shaped by the caste-like divisions of rural Sylhet.

Yet, as the differences between secular nationalists and Islamists over the uses of local space reveal, ethnicity takes various forms as people interpret the significance of Bengali language, Bangladeshi cultural traditions or religion in diverse ways. Furthermore, these diverse interpretations engage with debates beyond the ethnic boundary. As the British government responded to economic globalisation by privatising welfare provision, so community representatives were encouraged to take on roles formerly considered to be the preserve of the ‘welfare state’. As majority images of Bangladeshis and other ‘British Muslims’ came to emphasise their Islamic affiliations rather than their ethnic background, especially since the late 1980s, so state officials could focus on the role played by ‘faith communities’ in the moral regeneration of impoverished urban locales. This insider/outsider engagement not only linked local debates and practices concerning ‘multicultural celebrations’ and ‘forced’ and ‘arranged’ marriages to the British nation-state but also to Bangladesh and to the wider Muslim world.

During the last twenty years political and academic fashions have moved away from debates concerning class towards a focus on identities based around race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and age. This process has gone hand

in hand with an often impassioned debate about what multiculturalism means in contemporary, post-imperial Britain. This debate is particularly relevant to London where the global flows of migration have resulted in producing the highest proportion of ethnic minority residents in Britain – 28.8% compared with 9% nationally according to the 2001 Census (see <http://www.lsx.org.uk/news/page329.aspx>, accessed 21/12/04). However, if we look beyond current preoccupations with identity politics to particular locales, we can see how collective identities are shaped by an interweaving of class and non-class allegiances where we need to draw on both political economy and culturalist approaches. In the context of London's locales, therefore, we can move not only beyond any opposition between these two approaches but also beyond Sassen's influential model of the 'global city'. As this paper has tried to demonstrate, we can do this by exploring the complex ways in which those at the lower end of London's class structure – in this case, Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets – understand their everyday world and the manifold differences between themselves and between themselves and the wider world.

“The Brick Lane Festival captures the flavour and excitement of an area that has welcomed new Londoners for over 200 years. Taking place from 12 noon to 10pm, an amazing display of free music, dance and performance will celebrate Spitalfields [sic] rich mix of communities both past and present.

On Brick Lane itself: pavement café's [sic], a craft market, Asian drumming bands, Caribbean DJ's, the London School of Samba and lots of mad Brazilians, jostle with stilt walkers, rickshaw rides, clowns and jugglers. In neighbouring Allen Gardens the main stage showcases top world music acts, alongside a children's entertainment area with fun fair rides, massive free inflatables, stilt-walking and dance workshops.”

Highlights include:

Bangladesh's most popular band 'ARK' flying in to the UK to headline the main stage and performing a completely new globalised mix of 'Bangla Rock' influenced from the likes of Eric Clapton and Jon Bon Jovi. Completing the programme on the main stage is a mixture of Asian fusion, Funky jazz, East End rag time and Bengali dance all pulled together by 'Skorpio' an Asian compere, rap artist and poet '.

Carnival at Brick Lane's trendy Vibe Bar with live music percussion and DJ's concentrating on the sounds of Latin America, Trinidad, New Orleans and the West Indies.

Ballymore Bangla night @ Old Spitalfields Market from 7pm-10pm. The market owners fund a special Brick Lane Festival extension with a classical line up of music and dance from some of the UK's top Bengali performers.

More than just a good curry – this year's BLF launches the international Banglatown curry festival with speciality chefs from India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh preparing authentic regional dishes in the curry house kitchens for the whole month of September.

+ + + History tours, international dance on stage and street, park games, fortune telling and much more.

Commenting on the day's activities Nicki Burgess, Event Organiser from the 'Ethnic Minority Enterprise Project' says, "This year the interest in the festival has gathered huge momentum and is 'taking off' on its own, it is fantastic seeing the whole community caught up in the process. Now we have Ballymore and Old Spitalfields Market involved, it is a real opportunity to pull the whole community together"

For more information about the festival please call Nicki Burgess 020 76550906
Email nicki@emep.co.uk

The Festival is organised by the Ethnic Minority Enterprise Project. The Festival is funded through a mixture of public and private finance. Main contributors are Ballymore the owners of Old Spitalfields Market and Cityside Regeneration Ltd; This is the sixth Brick Lane Festival and it grows in size every year.”

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