In Pursuit of the 'Authentic' Bengali: Impressions and Observations of a Contested Diaspora

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Abstract:

This article examines the commonalities and differences constructed among different Bengali diasporic communities in London that purport to determine the authenticity of an ethnic Bengali identity. I argue that the 'dominant', homogenous discourse of multiculturalism fails to take into account the contestations of Bengali identity based on religion and class. Overall I seek to focus on the processes of objectification whereby various aspects of the Bengali identity are evoked situationally. The role of history, memory, fantasy, narrative and myth is also explored in an attempt to show that difference and commonality is relational.

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Introduction: An Ethnographic 'Stroll' in Brick Lane:

In 1999, the Labour Government named Brick Lane, located in the borough of Tower Hamlets in London, as '*Bangla* Town' (like Chinatown), i.e. the town of the people speaking '*Bangla*', the Bengali language, in order to acknowledge the contribution of the Bengali population to Britain and its multiculturalist ethos. To ascertain this *Banglaness*, a stroll down Brick Lane brings the traveller face to face with innumerable 'Indian curry houses'! Apart from the typical Indian names like 'Taj Mahal' and 'Indian Spice House', many of the restaurants with the names like 'Shampan' and 'Muhib' point to the links of the proprietors with that of the territoriality of Bangladesh, (*shampan* referring to a boat found in Bangladesh and *Muhib* connoting the name of the first head of state of Bangladesh namely, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman). Further into Brick Lane, shops sell *moras* (typical rattan seats used in Bangladesh) and various religious paraphernalia of Islam commonly found in Bangladesh. Cassette and video shops stock up the latest of Bipasha's television plays, cassettes of Lucky Akhand or any of the popular Bengali rock bands of Bangladesh along with Bollywood and Dollywood (as Dhaka's film industry is referred to) videos and tapes. From the street corner, tape recorders play the religious chants of various *imams* (religious heads) from across the world. Allauddin Sweets, with branches all over Bangladesh, also has a branch in Brick Lane, and does brisk business competing with other sweet shops in the street. Next to it, bright *sarees* and *salwar kameezes* are displayed in the windows of the various garment shops.

The main attraction of Brick Lane is its grocery shops, which sell all the vegetables from the subcontinent, something particularly noticeable during the summer months with

their display of jackfruits. A variety of fresh water fish from Bangladesh is also found in these shops along with innumerable varieties of food common in Bangladesh. *Surma* (named after a river in Sylhet) and other newspapers reporting on events in Bangladesh can be found in all the restaurants, cafes and newsagents here. Brick Lane, with its connotation of the spirit and materiality of Bangladesh, is located far away 'across seven seas and thirteen rivers' (a common Bengali saying) in Britain sharing its space with warehouses, bagel shops, hip hop bars, clubs, cafes and media offices. According to the 1991 census, Brick Lane has the largest Bengali community in the United Kingdom. The 37,000 resident Bengalis constitute a quarter of the nation's Bengali population and nearly all of them come from Sylhet, a north-eastern district of Bangladesh. In fact, out of the estimated 200,000 Bangladeshis in Britain, over 95% are Sylheti (House of Commons 1986-87)[1] and 81.81% migrants from Sylhet leave for the UK (Gardner 1995). A large number of Sylhetis are involved in the restaurants and 'curry houses' and curry has been referred to as the national dish by the British authority in 1997. In fact, out of 9,800 'Indian' restaurants in the UK, 85% are run by proprietors of Bangladeshi, and, specifically of, Sylheti, origin (Harriss 2001).

In order to avoid confusion as regards the terms Bengali and Bangladeshi, it is worth taking note that in 1947, the independence of India involved the creation of a homeland for the Muslims of India by carving a new nation out of the eastern and north-western corners which came to be known as East and West Pakistan respectively. East Pakistan in 1971 became Bangladesh and in order to distinguish itself from the Indian Hindu Bengalis residing next door, across the borders in West Bengal, Bengali nationalism was replaced by Bangladeshi nationalism in 1976. Coming from the same linguistic and cultural 'stock', Bangladeshis identify themselves as *Bangalis* (Bengalis) like their counterparts in India. A Bengali is one whose mother tongue is *Bangla* (Bengali) and also originates from Bengal, which includes West Bengal in India and East Bengal in Bangladesh.

My ethnographic 'stroll' in the opening paragraphs captures my introduction to the initial experience of Bangladesh (a country to which I would subsequently travel for my fieldwork in the following year) in Brick Lane, London, upon my arrival in Britain in 1996 as a first year PhD student. I had not visited Bangladesh from India in spite of sharing, among other cultural artefacts, the linguistic background of being a *Bangali*, i.e. one whose mother tongue is *Bangla,* and growing up in the Indian part of Bengal, which lies adjacent to Bangladesh. Since I did not know anyone in Bangladesh, I started networking in London among the Bangladeshi community, both Sylheti and non-Sylheti, for the purpose of my PhD research, which was aiming to explore the histories of sexual violence during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Also, by virtue of my extended family in Britain, I was getting to know Indian Bengalis living here. Thus the Bengali community[2] in London that was unfolding for me encompassed the Indian Hindu Bengalis, non-Sylheti Muslim Bangladeshi Bengalis and Sylheti Muslim Bangladeshi Bengalis[3]. Henceforth in the paper, I refer to these three groups of Bengalis as Indian Bengalis, non-Sylheti Bengalis and Sylheti Bengalis. These interactions among the variously positioned Bengali communities brought home to me the contestations that exist in the notion of being a 'Bengali' in the UK. In fact, the dominant discourse in the British press and government refers mainly to the Bangladeshi, i.e. Sylheti, community as 'Bengali' and the naming of the Sylheti-dominated Brick Lane in Tower Hamlets as 'Bangla Town' is deliberated upon among the non-Sylheti and Indian Bengalis who find themselves excluded from this dominant discourse.

I must clarify at the outset that this paper is based on impressions and observations among the various positionings of Bengaliness in Britain and is limited by my lack of observational anecdotes and viewpoints of the Sylheti population in London. Instead it is based on contestations of 'authentic' Bengaliness played out primarily by Indians and non-Sylheti Bengalis in London, both broadly being first generation upper middle class or middle

class professionals, vis-à-vis Sylheti Bengalis. I bring here not only my experiences in Britain among the various Bengali communities but also the dynamics from my fieldwork in Bangladesh. In the midst of these contestations of Bengaliness, my own claim to the authenticity of Bengali identity, as an Indian, Bengali, middle class woman having been born and brought up in West Bengal in India, doing fieldwork in Bangladesh, studying in the United Kingdom and being in touch with Indian non-Sylheti and Sylheti Bengalis in the UK, was also subjected to varied interrogations among the aforementioned communities. So this paper moves between Bangladesh, West Bengal in India, the multiple manifestations of Bengaliness in Britain and the multiple subject positions located therein of various Bengalis. The construction of the ethnic identity of 'Bengali' in the 'dominant' British discourse fails to take into account the contestations of Bengali identity and 'authenticity' based on religion and class. I argue that Bengali transnational linkages contribute to self-reifications as well as stereotyping of other Bengalis, which enables the sustenance of intra-ethnic divisions among Bengalis in Britain. Here I take recourse to Stuart Hall's (1993) idea of "positionings" and Gerd Bauman's (1996) "dominant" and "demotic" discourses. By dominant, Bauman refers to the media and government positions on a certain issue while demotic refers to people's modes of discourses situated in the everyday, evoking sited meanings and values contextually. However these should not be read as being completely distinct from each other as they constantly feed into each other. Reference to the dominant and demotic discourses allow me to focus on the various processes of objectification whereby various aspects of the Bengali identity are evoked situationally and explore contexts within which different Bengalis use cultural difference as a trope for class or religion in their attempt to reify themselves and other Bengalis and determine authenticity. In the first section, I map out the various theoretical arguments regarding multiculturalism and diasporic identity and show how many of them fail to take into account transnational linkages and intra-ethnic divisions. In the second section, I

explore the 'performed ethnicities' between Indian and Bangladeshi Bengalis by examining their histories of migration, the reification of stereotypes, the marking of gender as a site of contestation, transnational imaginaries and the location of supposed authenticity in myself, my perceived personhood,. In the third section, I explore what I refer to as the historical ethnicities between non-Sylheti and Sylheti Bangladeshis by focusing on the historical trajectory of Bangladesh, the stereotype of Sylhet in Bangladesh as well as an interrogation of my subject position during fieldwork in Bangladesh. In the final section, I explore the grocery shops of Bangla Town in the light of Les Back's (1995) notion of "liminal" ethnicity and Avtar Brah's (1996) theorisation of "diasporic space" but disagree that inter-being and mutual identification generated here through food, can subsume intra-ethnic differences between various Bengalis.

The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain and theorising its limits

Emerging as a corrective to assimilationist approaches, multiculturalism aims to abandon the myth of homogenous and mono-cultural nation states. As a result it recognises the rights of 'others' to cultural maintenance and community formation, thereby ensuring social equality and protection from discrimination. Critics of multiculturalism point out that "its model of representation deals only with elites; it freezes change, erects group boundaries; does not engage with globalisation and is woolly liberalism papering over inequality, conflict and power relations with a therapeutical, top-down discourse of multicultural unity." (Alibhai-Brown 2000).[4] A counter to this top down multiculturalism can be found in the explication of the situatedness and changing relationships of diasporic identitites in Homi Bhabha's notion of third space and hybridity (1994; 1997). However this framing of cultural multiplicities as hybridity has been challenged by Back on the grounds that in its attempt to transcend the essential subject, hybridity is prefigured on a spurious notion of cultural purity (1993 23). Rafique Ahmed[5] also critiques Bhabha's hybridity for its aspecificity and ahistoricity with

regards to a hybrid subject, which is remarkably free of any gender, class or race constraints (1995). Hence to recognise that one maybe located in more than one field of ethnicity, I would emphasise that the term Bengali 'is locked in a misplaced concreteness' (Bauman 1996,16) and might end up disguising morally and culturally divisive oppositions among Bengalis between religious, nationalist and linguistic groups. In fact, the main thrust of my argument is that these intra-ethnic divisions are under-explored in various works on diaspora even though the ethnographies (for e.g. Back 1995) exhibit accounts of this intra- and inter-ethnic tension.[6]

The Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, set up by the Runnymede Trust in January 1998, has produced what amounts to a new take on multiculturalism. In October 2000, the Commission produced its conclusions: a 400 page document entitled *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (Runnymede Trust 2000)*, also known as *The Parekh Report* after the Commission's chairperson, Lord Bhiku Parekh.[7] Influenced by Bhabha's and Hall's theorisations,[8] the commission, in order to consciously distance itself from the bounded, essentialised notions of 'community,' refers to Britain as both a "community of citizens" and a "community of communities"(1). Rather than reified cultures, it refers to "overlapping communities" (3) and "individual's multiple identities" and recognises that, "situatedness and relationships are changing" (10). Pnina Werbner's argument that hybridity museumises culture is similarly taken up by the critics of *The Parekh Report* (1997, 15). Despite their conscious anti-essentialism, Stephen Castles criticises the Commission for perpetuating the nation-state-as territorial-container model (2000:5)[9]. Steven Vertovec, pointing to "the global flows, multiple identities and cross border networks" of migrants, argues that the Commission fails to take into account the transnational linkages of people living in Britain (2001:18). As I have shown in my ethnographic 'stroll' down Brick Lane, the transnational linkages and attachments of Bangla Town gives it its *Bangla* flavour and makes it an

appropriate exhibit for multiculturalism within the nation state of Britain. The Runnymede Commission also fails to throw light on the forms of "substantial internal differences between communities" (26) and the ways in which "identities are situational" (25). Taking Vertovec's argument a step further, I would argue that not only do people have transnational attachments and belongings beyond the nation state but, as in the case of Bengalis in London, their transnational linkages aid in the fortification of intra-ethnic differences and authenticity among Bengalis based on religion, class and diasporic imaginaries. My paper demonstrates how the theorisation of these transnational linkages and intra-ethnic differences among ethnic groups enrich discussions and debates in diaspora studies.

The 'collective' identity of Indian and non-Sylheti Bengalis rests on the oppositions to, and resemblances with that of, the 'Bengalis' recognised in the British public discourse namely the Sylheti Bengalis as "there is no collective identity in and for itself, as a positivity without an implied negation" (Brah 1996:13). I seek to theorise this negation here contrary to Bhabha's (1997) and Hall's (1993) 'Otherness' or 'alterity'. The ambivalence[10] shared by Indian Bengalis towards Bangladeshi Bengalis cannot be understood here in terms of the other being "an object of desire and derision" (Hall 1992)[11] or "an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity" (Bhabha 1997). Instead, the point of intervention could focus more productively on the process of objectification itself whereby the various identities, of Indian, Bengali, Hindu, Sylheti, Muslim, Bangladeshi, male, female etc., maybe evoked situationally. Here we may remember Fredrick Barth's (1969) analysis of the permeability and contextual definition of all ethnic boundaries, Hall's (1993) notion of "positioning" and Bauman's (1996: 10) "dominant" and "demotic" discourses. The multilocational identities of Indian, Sylheti and non-Sylheti Bengalis maybe explained by Hall's argument (1993) that the play of 'difference' within identity encompasses the re-siting of its boundaries at different times in relation to different questions. I hope thereby to

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examine the processes whereby Bengali identity comes into play and constitutes the difference by which Indian Bengalis distinguish themselves from Bangladeshi Bengalis. To do this, I examine the 'positionings' (Hall 1993: 395) of Bengali cultural identities which, on the one hand, emphasise a collective 'true' shared identity which is produced by a re-telling of the past, often an 'invented', 'imagined' past and on the other, recognises that along with similarities, there are various points of difference whereby otherness gets constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Baumann's (1996) "dominant" and "demotic" ideas of community also help me to examine the stereotypes as the process of othering here exists in a complex field of relations of differences and intersectionality. Bauman demonstrates how reified views of minority 'culture' and 'community' infuse both dominant (e.g. media and government) and demotic (everyday people's) modes of discourse, evoking sited meanings and values contextually. I take the argument further by suggesting that they are also influenced by transnational, imagined, and subcontinental discourses at a time of long distance nationalism, deterritorialised nations and globalisation of domestic politics facilitated by satellite television and internet.

Performed Ethnicities: Indian Bengalis and Bangladeshi Bengalis

Migration Histories:

Bangladesh is not only templated in London but the imaginaries of London are also mapped out in Sylhet. When I visited Sylhet in 1998 for fieldwork, I looked in amazement at shops named Charing Cross Book Shop, West End Stationary Store, Diana Video Store in Sylhet town's main shopping area—a clear carrying over of London to Sylhet. Two- or three-storey high stone houses distinguished the homes of families in *Londoni* villages whose members had migrated abroad from Sylhet from the usual mud and thatch huts. In fact the migrant villages seemed prosperous with extensive material evidence of their overseas success; a far

cry from the impoverishment of the rest of rural Bangladesh. Remittances from abroad constitute one of the greatest flows of money in Bangladesh and have also funded the building of the Sylhet airport. The revenues of Bangladesh Biman depends completely on the to and froing of travellers between Sylhet and UK.[12]

Sylheti experience of overseas migration spans many generations. From the nineteenth-century onwards, British colonialists who frequented Sylhet because of its tea gardens, plantation trade and cooler climate, employed Bangladeshi men on British ship companies to perform the unpleasant tasks on board. Katy Gardner (1995: 35-52) in giving a detailed account of Sylheti migration history shows that a monopoly of the Sylhetis also grew by the 1930s and 40s due to the success of a number of Sylheti *sarengs* (foremen) who controlled employment and generally favoured their kinsmen and fellow countrymen as employees. Many seamen did not confine themselves to the seas but jumped ship and sought their fortune on dry land. A small but steadily increasing population of Sylhetis was thus established in Britain by the 1950s. The demand for cheaper and plentiful labour in the post-war British economy increased recruitments from South Asia. At this point, by virtue of what Gardner refers to as "chain migration",(1995: 34-65) more Sylhetis came to Britain. In Bangladesh, Sylhetis are compared to lobsters who in climbing up carry other lobsters along with them. With the decline in British industry in the last 1960s, new laws radically curtailing entrance to Britain had been introduced in 1970s. This precipitated a new form of migration from South Asia with most migrants applying for British passports and sending for their family. With factory work becoming less easily available, many Sylhetis switched to catering. Non-Sylheti Bengalis on the other hand came from upper middle class and middle class backgrounds. They moved to London at various points after the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971 as students and professionals: they now constitute the London-based literati and intellectual community of Bangladesh. The Indian Bengalis with a middle class background

also arrived in London as students in 1960s and stayed on as doctors, accountants, lawyers, engineers etc. They brought their wives with them and, in course of time, applied for British passports in the 1970s when new laws radically curtailing migrant entrance to Britain were introduced. Thus as dispersed people, Indian Bengalis found themselves in close contact with individuals from neighbouring Bangladesh, which they would not have visited while being in India but whose imaginary is mapped onto their selves given the 1947 Partition of Bengal. I would agree with Brah that here "diasporic identities are local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing imagined and encountered communities" (1996: 209). It is here that it becomes important to explore the stereotypes and reifications performed among the Indian Bengalis about Bangladeshi Bengalis.

Reification and Stereotypes:

The Indian Bengalis come from middle class families rather than the lower middle class Hindu Bengalis who moved from Bangladesh to West Bengal and who struggled to sustain themselves in West Bengal today. A common refrain of nostalgia among them is the loss of property in East Bengal i.e. present Bangladesh during Partition and subsequent times. As a result, they hold the stereotype of the Muslim man as riotous and violent who has 'dispossessed' them of their property in Bangladesh. When I came to London, I met various Indian Bengali families through extended family circles and informed them that I would be going to Bangladesh for over a year to do fieldwork. The immediate response from many individuals, who had spent their childhood in East Pakistan, was that of discouragement and a dark communal picture of Muslim Bangladesh was presented to me. They even suggested that I should change my topic and ensure that I do research in India so that my scholarship money is spent in my birth country. Subsequently I found that enquiries about my research became a catalytic point to emphasise the stereotypical image of the Muslim Bangladeshi. It seemed

that individuals who had unpleasant memories of communal riots in Bangladesh, had carried them to West Bengal whereby a common construction of the Muslim Bangladeshi became possible. It is this dominant stereotypical construction carried over from experiences in Bangladesh, which again gets reinstated in reference to the Sylheti Bengalis in London.

Borderlines as regards Sylheti Bengalis would be drawn when comparing the adornment of modern trousers and shirts by the Indian Bengali men while the Sylheti man would be referred to in terms of his cap, beard, *lungi* (unstitched cloth wrapped around the waist) and *kurta* (a long tunic). "Note how our women wear Bengali sarees and yet the Sylheti woman wears a saree but under a *burkha* (a cape worn over the saree). When is the *burkha* a Bengali dress?" pointed out Mr. Biswas, an upper middle class Indian Bengali lawyer. Also their Bengaliness would be tested in terms of their Bengali speech and accent. Mr. Biswas continued, "Have you heard them speak? You would not be able to understand what they say and yet it seems they are speaking Bengali and they are the ones the British government recognises as Bengali." Thus here the authenticity of Bengaliness is based on an ethnocentrism where one's own dress and language is naturalised and taken to be the characteristic of all Bengalis. The notion of Bengaliness of Sylhetis is interrogated on the subtext of religion whereby a Muslim man cannot be also a Bengali man as if Bengaliness is rooted in a Hinduised existence. Ironically Mr. Biswas's view is similar to that of West Pakistani government which he strongly dislikes given his experience in East Pakistan. Pakistani authorities after 1947 interpreted the practice of Islam in East Pakistan as too Bengali/Hinduized, and made it the object of various reformist movements (Ahmed 1981). Conversely (but in the same vein), for Mr. Biswas, the practice of Islam by Sylheti Bengalis seems to negate their identity as Bengalis. Thus here Bauman's (1996) dominant discourse seem to operate among Indian Bengalis whereby the cultural difference of Sylhetis is equated with their community which in turn is linked to their religious identity and the explaining

paradigm for all Sylheti thought, articulations and actions. In the process this linear collapsing also enables the speaker to deny them their ethnic authenticity as a Bengali.

Enquiries about my research made possible the excessive reiteration of the same old stories, which had to be retold compulsively and afresh. Phrases such as "I know them, that's the way they are" show that maximum objectification here has been successfully achieved. As Bhabha argues "the stereotype as a major discursive strategy is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always in place, already known and something that must be anxiously repeated." (1997: 37). How does gender then figure in these stereotypes and markers of difference?

Gender as a marker of difference:

To extend the debate around Bengali identity, just as the dress code of men and women among Sylheti communities becomes a trope of Islam, Sylheti women's mobility and inclusion into the labour market also serves as a trope for their religious identity. Bengali Indians, in pointing out that Islam prohibits Sylheti women's entry into the labour market, which in turn is hindered by their lack of mobility due to the wearing of the veil, and the practice of polygamy among Muslim men, ends up equating the reified Muslim Sylheti culture with a 'social problem' of women's repression. Here Sylheti families are pathologised with women being represented as docile and passive victims practising archaic traditional customs and practices and being repressed by domineering men. The effects of racial, sexual and class inequalities are rarely recognised as the problems faced by Sylheti women. In fact the emphasis on the *burkha* (veil) is vacuous, which is stressed to the point of exclusion of age, class or status. Thus "through reification, the world of institutions appear to merge with the world of nature" (Berger and Luckmann 1967:108)[13] which amounts to a suppression of historical process via recourse to biologism and crystallised religious culture. Brah has

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argued that such culturalist explanation as regards lesser involvement of Muslim women in economic activities do not take into account the later migration of Muslim men and women from Pakistan and Bangladesh compared to Hindu and Sikh women from India (1996:70). Emphasising that labour markets are racially gendered, Brah cautions that it is crucial to make a distinction between 'Muslim woman' as a discursive category of representation and Muslim women as embodied, situated, historical subjects with varying and diverse personal or collective biographies and social orientations (1996: 131).[14]

Sylheti women and men living in Tower Hamlets in London suffer from higher poverty and unemployment and have greater dependence on council accommodations compared to Indian Bengalis, a majority of whom maybe multiple house owners. Thus Sylheti Bengalis and their everyday lives are constituted in and through matrices of power embedded in intersecting discourses and material practices. In reality racism violates selectively and Bangladeshis in London suffer more street violence. Diaspora theories need to account for the ways in which cultural differences are persistently racialised, classed and gendered at the level of everyday social practice.

Imaginaries:

Keeping in mind the distinction between ambivalences of ethnicity with those of racism, it is important to note that Indian Bengali ethnic identities are performed through gestures of dis/identification whereby it is important to keep the differences alive between themselves and the Sylheti Bengali community so as to essentialise themselves. Self-essentialising as a mode of reflexive imagining is constitutive of self and subjectivity (Werbner 1997: 230). Self-imaginings of communities ensure the freezing of the homeland and its imaginaries. In their performative rhetoric, Indian Bengalis essentialise particularly among their children who have been born and brought up in UK and present a romanticised simplistic picture of Bengal

and India. They invoke an imagined community, of familial harmony and an 'unparalleled' Hindu and Bengali culture. In the words of Clifford Geertz, they tell themselves stories about themselves (1993), create an idea of a homeland frozen in time. Children of various families have over subsequent years travelled to India and have deconstructed their parents' ideas of India. Many of the children of my generation have, during discussions about their experiences in India, felt that their parents lied in trying to give them a romanticised view of India.

Indian Bengalis, however, do not just draw the boundaries of ethnicity on language alone but also on religion, memories of a shared history, visions of a shared destiny, a belief in common origins so that one maybe located in more than one field of ethnicity which also allows one to assert each of these identities of being Indian, Bengali, Hindu, British, all at the same time or one or a combination of these at different times. Thus an Indian Bengali and an Indian Punjabi who are ethnically distinct might assert a common identity of being Indian while distinguishing themselves from those of the same ethnic backdrop namely Bangladeshi Bengalis and Pakistani Punjabis respectively. The power to name, inscribe, identify, to essentialise, implies the power to invoke a world of moral relationships, which legitimises and interrogates the boundaries of the nation state. Clifford rightly observes that "it is not easy to avoid the slippage between diaspora as a theoretical concept, diasporic discourse and distinct historical 'experiences' of diaspora. They seem to invite a kind of theorising that is always embedded in particular maps, borders and histories" (1997: 266). The "moral and aesthetic communities" that Indian Bengalis imaginatively seek to identify with, emerge situationally in opposition to other moral and aesthetic communities (Werbner 1997: 240). Indian Bengalis in their 'authentic' Bengali positioning take recourse to the register of Indianness vis-à-vis the territoriality of Bangladesh while also positing themselves as an important Indian ethnic group vis-à-vis other regional groups within India. They attempt to evoke their Bengali moral and aesthetic communities by an espousal of Indian Bengali

literature and poetry, particularly the works of the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

Various cultural programmes, Bengali literature, enactment of plays along with the comings

and goings of various artists from Calcutta serve to keep alive their Bengaliness. I found a

large number of Indian Bengalis were surprised to know that Tagore's song is Bangladesh's

national anthem and that all official and unofficial business in Bangladesh is conducted in

formal Bengali rather than Urdu! They would, however, acknowledge that in contrast to the

'uncultured' Sylheti Bengalis, non-Sylheti Bengalis (a large number of whom constitute the

Bengali literati and intellectuals of Bangladesh) are intrinsically involved in the Bengali

cultural forum, though I had the feeling that their Bengali identity was being inauthenticated

by Indian Bengalis due to the Islamic underpinning of Bangladeshis.

Vis-à-vis a Bengali identity, Indian identity is achieved in various ways. This could

take the form of ordering the Vedas and various religious texts from India, going to temples

in London, which would exemplify their Hindu identity vis-à-vis all Muslims. Taking lessons

in various classical Indian dances, watching Bollywood movies, Zee, Sony and Star TV,

going to concerts of Bollywood movie stars, enables them to identify themselves vis-à-vis

non-Indians (though Bollywood movies, concerts and satellite television programmes from

India are watched by people from most countries of the subcontinent). Above all, discussions

around support for homeland politics and right wing Hindutva principles evoke experiences

of communal riots in East Pakistan (as referred earlier). This carrying over of territorial sub-

continental politics and memories is conflated onto Muslim populations here in Britain and

the Muslim Sylheti population becomes a self-evident illustration for communal feelings.

This objectification and reification of culture coexists among Indian Bengalis with their

attempt to make, remake and change it. A clear illustration of Bakhtin's "intentional

hybridisation"[15] maybe found in Mr. Chatterjee, an accountant by profession, who decided to

marry his dead brother's widow in India after the death of his own wife at the age of sixty-

five (1981: 358). He also said this idea was suggested by one of his Sylheti clients. Faced with family opposition in West Bengal, he attempted to rationalise it by citing Punjabi and Muslim kinship practices of marrying the dead brother's wife. While there should be no debate as to why he cannot marry his dead brother's widow, what is interesting to note is Mr. Chatterjee, a devout propagator of Hinduism and Bengali Hindu identity, had, on earlier occasions, pathologised the Sylheti Muslim families he is acquainted with, in terms of their marriage practices and, in more than one ways, has expressed his feelings against Muslims in general. Urdu names given to Indian Hindu children are considered by him as a Muslim or a 'strange name' for Indians. He would also narrate how Sylheti Muslims would deny him work as an accountant upon hearing his upper caste Hindu surname. Yet, on an instance where he has to defend his conduct against his own family's sense of middle class morality, the legitimising register can be none other than Punjabi and Muslim marriage practises. It is also important to note that a "multi axial performative conception of power" (Brah 1996: 189) highlights the way in which a group constituted as a minority along one dimension of differentiation maybe constructed as a majority along another. Moreover, individual subjects may occupy minority and majority positions simultaneously and this has important implications for the formation of subjectivity. Thus a discussion among Indian Bengalis about the naming of Bangla Town emphasised, on the one hand, that since the Sylhetis are a minority (read weakness) in terms of their class position but constitute the majority of Bengalis in London demographically, this recognition is necessary for them as they are in a weaker position. This could also be read, on the other hand, that Indian Bengalis maybe a minority in terms of numbers but are part of the majority (read strength) in terms of their class position.

Locating Authenticity:

Diaspora space as a conceptual category is 'inhabited' not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous.

<div align="right">Brah 1996: 208.</div>

I found that on my arrival as a PhD student in London for the first time in 1996 made me such an exhibit of indigenousness. Upon meeting a relative, he expressed surprise that I was in a pair of jeans rather than a saree since I have been born and brought up in India. I found out that I was expected to represent all the reified Indian values and delineate the good Bengali family story to British Bengalis of my generation here. My own authenticity as a Bengali woman born and brought up in Calcutta was interrogated due to my lack of stress on the *Vedas*, the *Gita* and other Hindu texts, the overall Hindu way of life and, above all, my interest in going to Bangladesh to do fieldwork. I realised that here the construction and telling of history had a geography as the way in which the past and the homeland was being imagined depended upon space, place, time as well as transnational Hinduism which located Bengali culture in a "misplaced concreteness" (Bauman 1996: 20).

Historical Ethnicities: Non-Sylheti and Sylheti Bangladeshis:

Most non-Sylheti Bengalis who make up the London-based intellectuals of Bangladesh consist of professionals, poets, journalists, writers etc. and are widely read and known in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Hence the dynamics between the non-Sylheti and Sylheti Bangladeshis can only be comprehended in the light of connotations of Bengali identity, which are associated with the Bangladesh Liberation War and Sylhet's stereotypical position within Bangladesh. As I have mentioned earlier, West Pakistani authorities considered the use of Bengali in East Pakistan as too Hinduised and the Bengali language was thus targeted to be replaced by Urdu as the only state language so as to purge Bengali culture of its perceived

Hindu elements. The ensuing resistance against various discriminatory policies of the Pakistani government became the Language Movement in 1952, leading to a series of protest movements over the years which culminated finally in a nine-month long liberation war which established the independent People's Republic of Bangladesh on 16th December 1971. Over the years, various protest movements included marches by women, dressed in sarees, with flowers in their hair, and *teep* (a mark of adornment on the forehead of women usually associated with Hindu marital symbol) on their forehead—their dress code emphasising a Bengali identity. In fact, over the years scholars, have emphasised the syncretic culture of Bangladesh combining various Islamic, Bengali and folkloric norms of the region (Ahmed 1981; Roy 1983; 1996). The struggle over this Islamic and Bengali identity is primarily played out in a certain social class of intellectuals and activists in Dhaka. Generally those emphasising a Bengali identity wear a *saree* and consider themselves to be secular, left/liberal, 'progressive' while those wearing a veil are seen to emphasise an Islamic identity by the former and identified as being right wing, religiously staunch and 'fundamentalist'. The stereotypical image of a local collaborator (*Razakar*) with the Pakistani army in 1971 is of one wearing a cap, having a beard, wearing a *kurta* and *lungi*. As a result of this struggle over the emphasis of a Bengali and Islamic identity, clothing patterns have been inscribed by the political history of the country. The pomp and celebration of the Bengali New Year (compared to the muted commemoration in West Bengal) and Martyr's Day on 21st February in Bangladesh is a testimony to the significance of this Bengali identity.

Sylhet also has a distinct identity within Bangladesh compared to the other districts. In 1874 the British decided that instead of being part of Bengal, Sylhet should become part of Assam. The area was again assimilated into Bangladesh through a public referendum after 1947 (Gardner 1995:37). Given its oil reserves and remittances, Sylhetis are aware of their region's importance to Bangladesh, which is expressed by their reference to the rest of

Bangladesh as a different country. At a Brick Lane Study Circle conducted by a group of Bangladeshi men and women where I was presenting a paper in February 2001, the discussion turned to whether Sylheti is a different language, thereby emphasising the exclusivity of Sylhetis from other Bangladeshis. In Dhaka and other parts of Bangladesh, Sylhetis are stereotypically considered to be '*moulobadi'* (fundamentalist) and I was cautioned to not disclose my Indian identity due to the prevalence of strong anti-India feelings among people. This was emphasised due to the dominance of the right wing Islamic Party, the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, a faction of which, in Sylhet, first issued the *fatwa* against the writer Tasleema Nasreen in 1993 for her alleged newspaper interview where she proposed that changes should be made to the Koran.

The non-Sylheti Bangladeshis, who discuss and engage in various artefacts of Bengali identity, namely Bengali literature and other Bengali cultural forms, express ambivalence with the Sylhetis and their Bengali identity. Thus the comments about the stereotypical Sylheti dress code as that of the aforementioned *Razakar* accoutrements of a cap, beard, *kurta* of the men and the *burkha* and saree for women should be contextualised in terms of the connotation of dress in the political history of Bangladesh. The documentary film, *The War Crimes File*, that exposed how three collaborators of the 1971 war are well known members of the Sylheti community in Tower Hamlet, fortified the stereotype of the link between collaborators, pro-Islamic standpoint and Sylheti people. Nonetheless, non-Sylheti Bangladeshis are aware of the enterprising capacities of Sylhetis here and acknowledge that they have contributed enormously to the British culture. However, here the emphasis on 'cultural difference' subsumes the class differences between Non-sylheti and Sylheti population, the former being house owners and having professional careers. Like Indian Bengalis, non-Sylheti Bengalis also narrativise class difference and transmute it into cultural credentials.

Sartorial Practises and Authenticity:

It is important to note that Bangladeshi Bengalis in London interrogate the Bengaliness of Indian Bengalis, considering them to be too Hindiised as a result of Bollywood movies and the overall preponderance of Hindi in India. My own subjectivity and sartorial practices were also interrogated in terms of my Bengali and Indian identity during my fieldwork in Bangladesh. I had decided to wear a *salwar kameez* during my fieldwork as my travelling itinerary across Bangladesh made the *saree* an uncomfortable attire for daily wear. I had been cautioned by a Bangladeshi journalist based in London about an anti-India and anti-Hindu rhetoric among some people and wearing the *saree* and a *teep* (spot adorning the forehead) is easily conflated to being a Bengali/Hindu/Indian dress beyond activist, left-liberal cultural elites outside Dhaka. However my *salwar kameezes* were considered by activists as distinguishably Indian by their styles, fashionlessness, cuts and cotton prints. I was also told that if I wear a *salwar kameez* I should not wear my *dupatta* around my neck as an accessory as 'they do in India' but should open out the *dupatta* or wear it as a V across my chest in order to cover it. Various NGO activists suggested that I was better off wearing a *saree* and *teep* (an accessory which is adorned by Bangladeshi activists given its resistive idioms during the anti-Pakistani movement before 1971) as I am from India. When I responded that I do not wear them even in India other than on special occasions, I felt that my Indian and particularly my Bengali 'authenticity' was being sternly interrogated and classified as 'too Hindi-ised' as the *salwar kameez* and lack of *teep* connotes a Muslim, Pakistani as well as non-Bengali historicity. Interestingly, the response among a group of upper middle class and middle class young men and women in their late 20s as regards my clothes was that they were not 'Indian enough' as most of their clothes were made according to the Indian fashion and film magazines. In the village where I did my fieldwork, I found that it was okay for me to not

wear *sarees* and as a single, young, unmarried, urban woman a *salwar kameez* was appropriate. In a conversation with the elders in the village, I was told that I had maintained *purdah* and preserved a code of conduct by wearing a *dupatta* 'appropriately' (i.e. that it covered my chest), not wearing jeans (which they said they knew I would wear otherwise) and my wearing of long sleeved, loose *salwar kameez*. Thus throughout my fieldwork my sartorial codes were resisted within various territorial boundaries of Dhaka, Calcutta, India, London.

Bangla Town as 'liminal ethnicity'?

The stereotyping across various Bengali groups however does not deter the coming together of Indian, non-Sylheti and Sylheti Bengalis, in various grocery and sweet shops in Bangla Town whereby Bauman's "demotic discourses" (1996: 10) maybe played out and divisions transgressed in sited interactions. This can be seen in terms of Back's "liminal ethnicity" and Brah's "diaspora space" (1996:208). Back defines liminal ethnicity as a space, which links social collectivities producing cultures of interbeing and mutual identification.[16] Diaspora space, according to Brah is where the multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted or prohibited perpetually integrate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition (1996: 208). Thus inspite of a "radical ambivalence" at the heart of determining authenticity of 'Bengaliness', the procuring of vegetables, fruits and fish becomes an important social code in being a Bengali (Bhabha 1997: 37). As a result all Bengalis in London would visit the grocery shops in Bangla Town or the adjoining Cash and Carry shops in the Tower Hamlet area so as to procure seasonal vegetables, fruits and fish available in Bengal, and ensure the Bengaliness of the taste buds. Gardner is thus right to suggest that "*Desh* (home) is more than just a physical mass of land,

trees, and rivers; it is the locus of one's social group" (1993:5). Hence by getting vegetables, fish and fruits from Bengal, *desh* is in a sense not only imported into *bidesh* (foreign land), but it becomes an extension of *bidesh*. However the stereotypes are not overlooked here; e.g. the reference by Indian Bengalis to the importance of *halal* meat among Bangladeshi Bengalis whereby soaps also have to be made from *halal* animal fat; significance of smelly *shutki* fish among Sylhetis or how my reverse eating habits of eating lentils first and fish at the end would be laughed at in Bangladesh as 'Indian eating'.

Thus Bangla Town, through the continuous circulation of people, money, goods and information, creates a sense of and becomes effectively the main source of preserving the culinary essentials of a single as well as varied Bengali community/communities in London. "While all journeys are physical, they are also acts of imagination in which home and destination are continually reimagined and thus forever changed" (Gardner 1995:35). This is common for all Bengalis shopping for their weekly seasonal *deshi* groceries in Bangla Town who thereby invoke, in the process, both local and global symbols in the pursuit of their 'authentic' Bengali selves.

Conclusion:

Bengalis are not a homogenous category in UK. The transnational linkages of both Indian and non-Sylheti Bengalis ensure the construction of cultural differences of Sylheti Bengalis. The reification of clothes, language, gender, I have argued, is a trope for religious difference based on imaginary homeland politics thereby enabling class difference as well to be narrativised and transmuted into cultural credentials. These stereotypes among Bengalis are transcended in networks of intersectionality in the grocery shops of Bangla Town in their aim to retain a Bengali characteristic through their culinary attachments. However the "cultures of interbeing and mutual identification" that exists in Back's liminal ethnicity (1995: 146), like in the

grocery shops in this paper, do not overcome reifications but co-exist with stereotypes which ossify cultural roots on the basis of history (as in the case of non-Sylheti Bengalis) or in the lack of focus on migration history (as in the case of Indian Bengalis when they stereotype Muslims through the lack of contribution of Muslim women in the labour market). Thus the construction of Bengali identity here is juxtaposed with demotic-sited fused identities and essentialist discourses that dent such fusings making difference and commonality relational. Diasporic theorisations need to account for such transnational linkages, its consequential intra-ethnic differences and reifications and sited commonality among 'Bengali' and other communities.

Notes:

[1] As cited in Gardner 1995.

[2] Here I use community as a way to describe a collective. That does not mean it is bounded, static, homogenous and fixed as a collective.

[3] By Indian Hindu Bengalis, I refer to Bengalis who have been born and brought up in West Bengal in India and do not include Indian Hindu Bengalis who live outside West Bengal in India. Similarly non-Sylheti Muslim Bangladeshis refer to all Bangladeshis who are not from the broader Sylhet District. Sylheti Muslim Bangladeshis refer to those who are from the broader Sylhet area of Bangladesh.

[4] Alibhai-Brown, Y. 2000. *After Multiculturalism*. London: The Foreign Policy Centre as cited in Vertovec (2001).

[5] Ahmad, A. 1995. 'The Politics of Literal Postcoloniality', *Race and Class* 36.3:9 as cited in P. Mongia 1997. ed *Contemporary Post Colonial Theory: a Reader.* Arnold: London.

[6] Examples of this maybe found in Les Back (1995), where Apache Indian, the Indian rap and *patois* singer reminisces, "I always wanted to go into the record shop but there were always so many black people hanging around the shop and I was almost frightened to go in." At another

point he says, "I remember I walked into a shop and as soon as I walked through the door people started to talk in Punjabi. They saw my locks and checked me as a black guy. I remember the shopkeeper said something like 'watch out this black guy is going to tief [thief] something. What made it worse was that it wasn't white people who were saying this."

In spite of these apparent tensions between inter-ethnic groups, (in this case between Asian Punjabi and Black people), Back (1995) chooses to emphasise instead a suspended temporal "liminal ethnicity" in the music clubs where different groups of people bond through the same music and thereby breaks down boundaries between Asians, Whites and Blacks.

[7] The right wing newspaper, *Daily Telegraph*, interpreted the term British used by the Report as being equivalent to racist while the Commission clarified that it wanted to say that British is no more to be associated solely with white people.

[8] Stuart Hall was also a member of the Commission.

[9] Castles, S. and A. Davidson 2000. *Citizenship and Migration: Globalisation and the Politics of Belonging.* Basingstoke: Palgrave as cited in Vertovec (2001).

[10] It is important to differentiate here Hall's and Bhabha's ambivalences of racism and its violence from that of everyday ethnicity which is in operation here.

[11] Hall, S 1992 [1988] 'New Ethnicities' in James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds) *Race, Culture and Difference*. London: Sage Publications in association with Open University as cited in Werbner (1997).

[12] Refer to Gardner (1995) for an ethnographic account of movement of Sylheti Bangladeshis between Sylhet and Britain.

[13] Berger, P and T. Luckmann. 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books as cited in Baumann (1996: 213).

[14] Brah (1996:113) also points out that the dimensions which are important to determine form, extent and patterns of women's participation in the labour markets are the histories of

colonialism and imperialism which shaped post Second World War migration, the timing of migration, post-war restructuring of the national and global economies, changing structure of the regional and labour markets, state policies especially on immigration control, racism in labour market, segmentation of the labour market by gender, class, age and ethnic background. Also women who enter the labour market inhabit lived cultures which are highly differentiated varying according to countries of origin, rural/urban background of households prior to migration, regional and linguistic background in the subcontinent, class position in the subcontinent as well as in Britain and regional location in Britain.

[15] Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Hosquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press as cited in Werbner (1997: 4). In his work on dialogical imagination, Bakhtin makes a key distinction between two forms of linguistic hybridisation: unconscious 'organic' hybridity and conscious, intentional hybridity. Intentional Hybridisation according to Bakhtin create an ironic double consciousness, a collision between different points of views on the world which are internally dialogical, fusing the unfusuable.

[16] Liminal here should not be read in terms of Turner's (1970: 93-110) 'liminoid social forms' which resemble liminal states as marginal, fragmentary, outside the central economic and political process with an element of stability and fixity but are also seen as deviant or form part of some cultural pathology.

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