

Rethinking ‘the Muslim community’: Intra-minority identity and transnational political space

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Introduction

Since the 5th February 2013 Shahbag intersection in central Dhaka has been occupied by tens of thousands of Bangladeshis demanding justice for war crimes. The occupation has been taking place in the context of an ‘International Crimes Tribunal’, set up by the ruling Awami League in 2010, to investigate crimes committed by Islamist politicians during the Liberation war of 1971. At its peak it is thought to have involved as many as 500,000 protestors¹, and the area was quickly dubbed Shahbag Square, prompting what some are calling ‘the Bangladesh Spring’ - the biggest mass protests the country has witnessed in twenty years.

However, on the 28th February the demonstrations turned violent after Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, the vice-president of Jamaat-i-Islami, the country’s largest Islamic party, was sentenced to death. Jubilation in Shahbag Square was quickly followed by violence between Jamaat supporters and the police, and almost 100 people have been killed in clashes which have swept the country since. Commentators in the UK have highlighted the grief and anger the tribunal has stirred, particularly among the younger generation². They have reported on the powerful sense of national pride and collective possibility that Shahbag reveals³, as well as the intractable political gulf the recent bloodshed underscores.⁴ However, few have considered what this polarised political crisis, on the other side of the world, means here in the UK, and what this might tell us about Muslim identities in contemporary Britain.

From Shahbag Intersection to Tower Hamlets

The conflict between the secular nationalist spirit of Shahbag and supporters of Jamaat came to London on the 9th February. Local followers of the uprising demonstrated in Altab Ali Park, off the Whitechapel Road in London’s East End. Protestors were met by Jamaatis, stones were thrown, but the protest continued undeterred⁵; an encounter which demonstrates that in the UK, as in Bangladesh, the Liberation War is not just history but continues to be fought over in the present⁶. The relationship between Bengali organisations in the UK concerned with finding and prosecuting ‘war criminals’ from 1971 (such as the Nirmal Committee, an offshoot of its Bangladeshi progenitor) and more Islamist-inspired groups (like the East London Mosque) are known to be strained, and these tensions have implications for the new generation of young politically engaged British Muslims⁷. But little is known about how relations between these groups form the basis for identities and claims-making in the UK, and little is known about how relations between these groups work their way into contemporary spaces of British Muslim politics.

Taking these questions seriously requires us to historicise debates around South Asian Muslims in this country, and history challenges the homogenising terms of those debates. Constructed as the privileged site of ‘community’ and static immutable ‘tradition’, South

¹ Tahmima Anam, Guardian, 13th February

² Saurabh Shukla, The Daily Mail, 28th February;

³ Tahmima Anam, Guardian, 13th February

⁴ Syed Zaim Al-Mahmood, Guardian, 23rd February

⁵ Nick Cohen, The Guardian, 17th February

⁶ Alexander, 2012

⁷ Eade, 1989; Eade and Garbin, 2006

Asian Muslims in the UK have been most usually defined through cultural absolutes which are located outside political process or history. But this well rehearsed representation is quickly unsettled by history itself; revealing the complicated trajectories of social and political engagement that position Muslims in very different ways. Exploring 'intra-minority' identity disrupts monological assertions of 'difference' with insights into the multi-layered and contested dimensions of diasporic space. Here, the position of Urdu-speaking 'Biharis' in Bangladesh is a case in point, and one which raises important issues for Muslim identities in Britain.

Contesting Community and Citizenship: Intra-minority Muslim identities in Bangladesh

Originating in North and Eastern India, the 'Urdu-speaking Bihari⁸ community' were first displaced in the Partition of the Indian Sub-continent in 1947, before the involvement of some in Bangladesh's War of Liberation in 1971 displaced many for a second time. It is thought that around three million Bengalis lost their lives in the struggle, and the new country was left profoundly traumatized. Following the war, the entire 'Bihari' community were branded enemy collaborators and socially ostracised. Some fled overseas, particularly to the US, Pakistan and the UK, while others, having been dispossessed by the state, found themselves in temporary camps set up nationwide. For thirty-six years those living in the camps were recognised as a 'de facto stateless' community by UNHCR. In May 2008, they regained their citizenship in a High Court Ruling that was thought to turn their situation on its head; however their uncertain status has been thrown into relief again in the current political turmoil.

My previous research (Redclift 2013) compared the trajectories of those displaced into camps with those who had been able to retain their homes during the war, **examining the precarious nature of claims to rights before and after the transition to formal citizenship**. It involved semi-structured and narrative interviews, documentary analysis, focus groups and participant observation conducted between 2006 and 2009, and it developed the concept of 'political space' to capture the way in which identity and citizenship are structured in space, over time, and through social position. It argued that citizenship is not a stable identity of law and fact but a shifting assortment of exceptions, rejections, inclusions and denials, and the concept of 'political space' is better equipped to deal with the inequalities of 'race', ethnicity, age, class, space and gender hidden behind citizenship's beneficent facade. 'Political space' better reflects the fractious, contested and constantly evolving nature of political identity which can clearly be seen in Bangladesh today and it opens up debate about the role of transnational political engagement in shaping claims to future belonging in the UK.

Transnational Political Space in Britain

New research develops this analysis by applying it to those 'Urdu-speakers' who left Bangladesh in 1971 and established themselves in Britain. As Muslims of Indian origin they were labelled 'Biharis' in East Pakistan and became known as 'Stranded Pakistanis' following the Liberation War; however their links with the Indian, Pakistani or Bengali communities in the UK are unknown. It investigates the extent to which 'Urdu-speakers' experience and perform their identity differently in different settings and the extent to which issues of gender, generation, class and space inform or challenge ethnic, national and religious solidarities. Tensions between Pakistan and Bangladesh persist, but how has this historical memory of conflict has been carried forward into the diaspora?

⁸ A label that literally means 'from the state of Bihar' but is today associated with certain derogatory connotations.

Shahbag Square shows us the importance of history in the present, and Altab Ali Park shows us that this history informs experiences in the UK, but what is its role in the formation of British Muslim identities today? Do new attachments to place challenge exclusionary national identities or simplistic accounts of diasporic cultures, or do they create new exclusions and additional simplifications? And does the increasing role of religion in discourses around South Asian Muslims assuage on-going tensions or shift transnational political terrain?

Conclusion: unpacking 'the Muslim community'

South Asian Muslims are still all too often represented in British popular discourse as a single monolithic bloc. The specific and variegated histories of social and political engagement that constitutes the demotic and discordant, multi-layered and contested 'Muslim community' have been very much ignored. Exploring 'intra-minority' identity is, therefore, an important task. It expands our understanding of 'hidden minorities', as well as relations *between* and *within* minorities, bringing historicity and spatiality to bear on our understanding of Muslim identities in the UK. **The struggles and solidarities of transnational political space have, in recent weeks, been stirred. This project situates contemporary claims to citizenship in Britain within the power of a historical legacy which is not going away.**

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