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## **FROM DIASPORA TO MULTI-LOCALITY: WRITING BRITISH-ASIAN CITIES**

### **Co-applicant(s):**

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### **Summary:**

The diverse local character and trajectories of the South Asian diaspora in Britain today is the product of post-war immigration from particular parts of India, modern Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as East Africa. Recognising that there is now an urgent need to reflect historically upon 60 years of this presence, the network will be the first to compare the changing dynamics of five British-Asian localities. It will examine how each presence has been 'written' by different constituencies in scholarly ethnography, novels and other forms of cultural production, as well as in the (local) media and official reports.

### **Outline of the Network Project:**

#### **- fit to programme**

This network revisits the study of South Asians in Britain. It interrogates the concept of 'diaspora' by probing the ways in which the 'South Asian diaspora' might be reconceptualised as comprising communities whose identity, on both individual and collective levels, is grounded in 'multi-locality'. For the first time, the meaning and importance of 'multi-locality' will be explored through a comparison of five British-Asian cities, with 'the local' simultaneously speaking to precise regions people have migrated to and from. The 'multi-local' captures more effectively, we believe, the divergent experiences, cultural capital and mobilising energies of Asian groups in Britain—be they Bradford's Mirpuris, Manchester and Birmingham's Punjabis, Leicester's Gujeratis and African Asians or Tower Hamlets' Sylhetis. At the same time, we acknowledge the influence of still emergent, transnational forces, such as pan-Islamism, which are also deconstructing the idea of a 'South Asian diaspora' in Britain.

In terms of complicating the dominant 'race and ethnicity' paradigm of the social sciences, firstly, there is a need and opportunity now to examine the multi-local dimensions of Asian-Britain historically. Almost sixty years after post-war immigration began, a sophisticated historical narrative about the changing dynamics of these communities is waiting to be written. Secondly, there is a pressing need for literary and cultural studies to scrutinise the cultural production of the grassroots as well as cosmopolitan intellectuals, exposing the fraught and nuanced processes of

memorialisation, celebration, mourning and self-fashioning to fresh analysis. Thirdly, given the role of religious affiliations in reinforcing trans- and multi-local 'ethnic' communities, but also in the sustaining of more cosmopolitan and 'universalising' transnational circulations, the network will also prioritise new reflections on the explanatory power of religion.

Finally, 'multi-locality' also signals the comparative nature of the proposed network. We ground an innovative understanding of Asians in Britain within regional micro-histories that in turn foreground the ways in which locality and community have been 'written', both by 'outsiders' and 'insiders', in terms of ethnography, literature, oral histories and official reports. Regional micro-histories have also structured and shaped distinct modes of British-Asian cultural production – newspapers, novels, bhangra, film. By involving scholars working on any of these areas in specific cities of the UK, the network will question the very notion of 'South Asians in Britain' by uncovering the multi-local choices and forces shaping communities and their expressive practices. Providing opportunities for historical, comparative, practice-lead and innovative case studies, the network aims to extend in necessary and timely ways, the very understanding of the terms 'diaspora', 'migration' and 'identity'.

#### **- rationale and context**

Alongside the maturation of British-Asian communities and their distinctive contours, there is the ever-increasing infiltration of mainstream popular culture by 'Asian Cool' in the form of fashion, food and fiction. Yet between that appropriation of easily assimilated cultural production and the lived, variegated experiences of divergent South Asian communities in Britain, there are gaps and discrepancies which are symptomatically re-inscribed within policy-making, media reportage, and a general perception of the crisis of multiculturalism. The fragmentation and reformation of a composite 'Asian' identity since the rise of religious nationalism in South Asia and international politics post 9/11, have placed unprecedented pressure on diasporic communities. With this context comes new responsibilities on academia to shed light on the context of such pressures. Given the embeddedness of British-Asian communities within regional politics both in the UK and in South Asia, it is imperative that scholars enquire how far locality has (re)emerged as an axis of identity (re)formation. Through disciplinary and interdisciplinary reflection, a systematic comparison of multi-localities, and the careful involvement of 'cultural' and 'community' sector representatives, the network aims to generate fruitful and novel interaction, offering the results of our collaboration to policy-makers, arts and cultural initiatives, and a wide range of civil society actors.

#### **- aims and objectives**

Apart from the creation of a web resource on multi-local Asian Britain and other outcomes detailed below, the main aim of the network will be a permanent forum for arts and humanities discussion of the South Asian presence in the UK. As an initial vehicle for this, we propose five meetings in Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham, Leicester and Tower Hamlets between March 2006 and June 2007. We also propose a symposium in January 2008 to consolidate and reflect upon the work on each locality. A steering committee will select invited speakers for each network meeting, briefing them to reflect upon the ways in which they themselves (or their organization / institution) have contributed to the 'writing' of the British-Asian city in question at particular moments in time. Looking to the future, the most important aim is to

provide an environment of sustained and focused interchange for scholars based at different universities.

**- speakers and participants**

Speakers at network meetings would be drawn from academics (local and oral historians, ethnographers), representatives of the local media and local authorities, as well as representatives of British-Asian community organisations and writers (or film-makers, artists, musicians). Workshops in each locality will be open to wider members of the academic and other communities, although there will be a limit on total numbers of 30 to retain the intimacy of the network.

**- management**

During the first two years the network will be coordinated from Leeds by the principal and co-applicants in collaboration with steering group partners from other universities and two non-academics. The applicants have recently secured 'pump-priming' from Leeds Humanities Research Institute to co-ordinate South Asian Studies research in the Arts and Humanities across the university and a seminar series is up and running. The team has an excellent working relationship as well as individual experience of directing / consulting on research projects, organizing networks and conferences, and co-editing research outputs.

The steering committee, chaired by the principal applicant, would meet in advance of, and immediately after, each network meeting. Its main business would be firstly to monitor planning and publicity, finalise invited speakers and other participants, approve web resources and manage the administrative support. Secondly, it would ensure the ongoing academic fit to programme priorities, reflecting self-consciously upon interdisciplinary themes and interpretations raised by each local meeting.

**- outputs and dissemination:**

- a) A web resource for academic and non-academic audiences, containing: i) five openly edited papers on the 'writing' of British-Asian Bradford, Manchester, Birmingham, Leicester and Tower Hamlets; ii) webspace for the collation of new and existing electronic historical, literary-cultural and religious resources relating to these British-Asian cities; iii) a virtual exhibition explicitly comparing each locality.
- b) A conference paper presenting the findings of our exchanges.
- c) A book edited by the applicants publishing the five synthesized accounts / analyses of *Writing British Asian Cities*, together with a substantial introduction and conclusion.
- d) A collectively authored refereed article for reflecting on our research methodology and main conclusions.
- e) Invitations to the local press to contribute to (and report on) each workshop. At the end of the project national media will also be briefed with a view to special coverage.
- f) A short, accessible, electronic version of the final report available via the web resource for interested individuals, community organizations and institutions including non-academic participants in the workshops.