

Rethinking Muslim Migration: Frameworks, flux and fragmentation

Victoria Redclift and Fatima Begum Rajina

Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK
Languages and Cultures of the Near and Middle East, SOAS, London, UK

Abstract

In the wake of the San Bernardino and Orlando shootings, as well as the Paris and Brussels attacks, and in the midst of the right wing populism of US Presidential campaigns and UK Referendum debates, the political rhetoric around Muslim migration has sunk to an all-time low. *The Bengal Diaspora* provides a much needed antidote. By studying Muslim migration across continents the book provides insights into a global climate of Islamophobia, and it challenges us think critically about migration theory's universalizing logic. In this review essay we will focus on the three areas of study in which the book makes the most striking intervention, as well as three questions it leaves unanswered or poses for future work.

Keywords

Migration, diaspora, the nation-state, South Asia, Islamophobia, assimilation

At a time when Muslim migrants *in* and *from* the Subcontinent are the object of political interest and public anxiety *The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration* is a welcome contribution to debates. As the authors observe, Muslim migrants across the globe occupy uncertain citizenship; represented as both an ahistorical 'community' transcending time and place, and an anachronistic, and 'suspect' group who threaten a clash of civilisations (p.3). However, by studying the Bengali Muslim diaspora in three countries (the United Kingdom, Bangladesh and India), the book provides insights into a global climate of Islamophobia, using these different field sites as a window into a connected and disconnected body of experience. In this review essay we will focus on the three areas of study in which the book makes the most striking intervention into the connected body of experience to which it speaks, as well as three questions of disconnection it raises for future work.

First, by using "a historically sophisticated and empirically rich ethnography of processes and relationships" (p. 3) the study successfully tackles the difficult task of researching and writing across disciplinary boundaries. The rich ethnographic material, drawing upon the narratives of over 200 interviews, allows journeys to unfold organically, but always against the backdrop of shifting historical conjunctures. By bringing history, sociology and anthropology into dialogue in this way, it situates the micro against the macro and reveals points of tension within both the sociological and the historical common sense. An example of this is the way 'community' appears not as an 'a priori' fact of identity but as an evanescent, changing, 'something that happens' in response to particular historical events (p.187). Or the way migration networks, when studied through a historical lens, appear as fragile connections, susceptible to atrophy or rupture (p. 249) rather than the stable 'internal momentum' Douglas Massey (1990) famously described. Our own research among the Bengali diaspora in London, Birmingham and Los Angeles has underscored the importance of networks in providing the circuits of information that are necessary to survive in a new place, but also revealed the spaces of 'community' that are open to certain

newcomers and closed to others. Challenging some of the more celebratory literature on networks which we have become used to, then, the study demonstrates that networks are not neutral spaces, they are hierarchical, and they can function to limit migrants' choices rather than expand them.

Second, as the history of the subcontinent reminds us nation-making makes refugees, and refugee-making builds nation states. Nevertheless, many accounts of diaspora and hybridity gloss over the harsh realities of the nation state for migrants and refugees, especially in the global south. Similarly, many accounts of transnationalism downplay the role of the state in shaping the actions of migrants. *The Bengal Diaspora*, instead, illustrates the role played by structures of power in both encouraging and constraining movement. Post-Partition migrants in Pakistan had enormous faith that the nation would provide for them, and the authors highlight the extent to which this influenced their decision to migrate. Here Partition's migrants are not unlike the international travellers of today. The Bengali Londoners and Angelinos in our own work, who have struggled against the discrimination and downward mobility of migration, frequently express enormous faith in the British and American states to provide the kind of life that might make those struggles worthwhile. As history demonstrates that faith has not always been rewarded. The Pakistani state tore through Bengali lives, as the British state turned (and turns) a blind eye to structural racism, and as the American dream continues to let undocumented DREAMers down.

In a similar way, the chapter on marriage migration highlights how intimate choices are set against the demands of a national migration regime external to individuals, couples and families. The inclusion of personal stories and experiences reveals how, as the authors explain, women traced pathways within and across borders and were entangled in big and little histories which they indelibly shaped (p.156). The narratives of these women assert a "presence and complexity in the face of erasure, simplification, and stereotyping; and...offer an embodied, lived, and changing vision of the migration process" (p. 156). But these lived experiences and changing visions are lived and change within the limits of the nation-state in which they settled. As we see in the final chapter, for example, claims for rights in countries of settlement have to be couched in terms deemed legitimate, revealing "the profound impact of nationalism and racism on contemporary formations of diaspora and on diasporic projects of making claims" (p.241). In particular, the significance of class and status in the context of these brute processes of nation-making comes out very clearly. The strain of poverty on abilities to claim the identity of 'true citizens' resonates strongly with some of our own work among 'Biharis' in the Bengal delta (Redclift, 2013), as does the search for 'respectability' through a 'modern' Muslim identity based on piety and the practice of 'proper' Islam (Redclift, 2015). In bringing these ideas together the study points to the impact of political exclusion at the level of the nation-state on religious practice and experience, and brings to life the boundary drawing around religion, class and status that takes place in the context of diasporic lives.

That boundary drawing leads us to the study's third major contribution. The book forcefully underlines the failure of the categories of religion, nation or ethnicity to make sense of migrations lived experience. As the author's themselves admit any attempt to produce a singular narrative of the 'Bengal diaspora' buckles in the face of fragmentation (p.245). The blurring of boundaries between Shia and Sunni, between Muslim and Hindu, or Bihari and

Bengali is a powerful feature of the stories that emerge. The presumed stability of communal identities, the homogeneity of 'majorities' and 'minorities', are challenged by identities which are multiple and overlapping. The sense is of a dense, shifting and cosmopolitan landscape, where tradition is invented in place and context, and where beliefs, practices and lifestyles are refashioned over time. In a similar way, and as the current refugee crisis in Europe indicates, the categories of economic migrant and refugee are revealed to be much less helpful than we might think. The book draws on the stories of an extremely diverse selection of migrants to show how forms of migration co-exist and overlap. 'Economic' migration is both a precursor and a product of refugee movement; and very often mobility is marked by both.

All of these interventions raise vital questions for research and in many ways the book is particularly stimulating in relation to the areas it opens up for future work. The authors have chosen sites across the UK and Bengal that are distinctive for exploring a multiplicity of migratory lineages and transcending binary and homogenizing approaches, but some ideas may speak more clearly to particular sites than others. Perhaps the most obvious example is the thought-provoking concept of 'mobility capital', which the study introduces. Scholars of migration cannot ignore the fact that mobility is asymmetrically distributed, and cannot be understood without an understanding of those who do not move (see Gardner, 2006). However, if we take the blurred boundaries between economic and forced migration seriously (as we should) then the concept of 'mobility capital' may not accommodate the true extent of migration decisions and pre-migration positions. Specifically, while it is true that inequality in access to mobility is a historical fact, nicely drawn out in chapter one, some people move because they lack particular 'capital', rather than, as the authors suggest, because of the range of capitals which they can claim. Whether it is a lack of the capital necessary to access decent healthcare for a disabled child in Chittagong, or a lack of the capital necessary to avoid political persecution from the Government in Dhaka – people don't always move because of the range of competencies and assets at their disposal. In chapter two the authors speak of the role of 'relative deprivation' in encouraging individuals and families to migrate – this resonates with the stories of many of our own interviewees who moved to the US in the last ten years because of corruption and insecurity in Bangladesh but also because they could no longer afford rapidly growing school fees for their children. They had enough capital to move, but not enough to keep up with their peers, and the pressures of private school education. What drives people to move or stay, and the kind of capital that determines such a choice, may not be easily pinned down, but 'mobility capital' is certainly an idea that will provoke further investigation.

Second, the authors argue that international and internal migration would be more usefully understood within the same analytical framework (p.250). It is certainly true that the Global South must be seen as a place of arrival as well as flight, and that South-South migration deserves much greater attention. Moreover, a simple binary reifies international borders in a way that may not do justice to the place of borders in people's lives. But by combining these phenomena under a single framework are we missing some important differences? For example, as we have already discussed, the authors qualify the central role that networks have played in migration studies. What the book uncovers are first that networks were not sufficient to enable migration in the Bengal upheavals, let alone produce it, as well as the factors that persuade people to stay on even when they are in danger (p.75). And

second, the fragility of some networks, which degenerate in adverse circumstances. One element of this complex interplay that the authors do not discuss is whether or not networks are more important in the context of international migration than they are closer to home – minimizing the risks and maximising the advantages associated with more dramatic, potentially riskier, choices? Equally, is the observation that “people with similar assets or competencies tended to head towards similar destinations” more meaningful at the local rather than the global scale? What is more obviously apparent from our own research on international movement to Los Angeles is the range of different assets or competencies and high status occupations many migrants from Bengal arrive with (bankers, engineers, civil servants) and the narrowing of opportunities on arrival. Is the observation that in less developed countries migrants are influenced by finding employment commensurate with their standing equally true of those who move overseas? The de-skilling and downward mobility for the first generation of Bengalis in the UK and the US suggests that aspirations for their children often trump aspirations for themselves. Racialized stereotypes of labour migration – from the tea, jute and coal industries of imperial Bengal to the grocery stores and gas stations of present day L.A – force us to question whether particular ‘dispositions’ draw migrants to ‘matching’ destinations as much as the aforementioned circuits of power do.

Finally, as the authors explain, migration histories are not about the past as much as they are about the present. Chapter 8 narrates the diaspora through two books: 1) *The Roots and Tales of Bangladeshi Settlers* by Yousuf Choudhury; and 2) *Biharis. The Indian Emigres in Bangladesh* by Ahmed Ilias. The books, according to the authors, attempt to produce a linear, normative narrative, or ‘origin myth’, and both were written with a view to enabling ‘assimilation’ of the community for which they claim to speak. They highlight the way in which the ‘work of assimilation’ requires that the past and the present are interwoven in the insertion of ‘community history’ into the ‘national history’ of the host (p.229). Not only does this mean that history needs to be understood in the context of contemporary challenges but that contemporary claims-making may be rooted in particular versions of group history and how they are remembered. Assimilation, then, is dependent on the construction of a singular migration myth which produces a unified, distinct and separate identity. Not only does this explain why ‘Biharis’ in Bangladesh have been given a universal origin, but also why Bangladeshis in Britain (perhaps South Asian Muslims in the diaspora more generally) have been constructed as a single monolithic bloc. The production of an identifiable and coherent story of ‘difference’ as a necessary prolegomenon to understanding and integration is a valuable insight. It is one which leads us to wonder whether more could be said about who it actually is who writes these origin myths? Is it migrants themselves (as the book seems to suggest) or the social forces that seek to make sense of them, and against which they have to work on their identities in order to be accepted.

The Bengal Diaspora provides a remarkable insight into the life changing opportunities and painful compromises of migration wherever it occurs. The insights gained from the interdisciplinary approach and the theoretical interventions which these advance will generate much commentary and debate. The book encourages readers to contemplate the connections and disconnections between the experiences of Muslim migrants across continents; it inspires them to re-imagine the concept of diaspora at its most intimate scale;

and it leaves them with a sense of lives lived through flux and fragmentation as opposed to the universalizing frameworks history, sociology and migration studies treasure most.

Acknowledgements

Victoria Redclift and Fatima Rajina's comparative research into experiences of citizenship among Bangladesh-origin Muslims in London, Birmingham and Los Angeles is funded by a Phillip Leverhulme Prize (PLP-2014-221) and an ESRC Future Research Leaders Grant (ES/N000986/1).

References

- Gardner, Katy (2006) 'The Transnational Work of Kinship and Caring: British-Bengali Marriages in Historical Perspective', *Global Networks*, 6 (4): 373-387
- Massey, Douglas (1990) 'Social Structure, Household Strategies and the Cumulative Causation of Migration', *Population Index*, 56, (1): 3-26
- Redclift, Victoria (2013) *Statelessness and Citizenship: Camps and the Creation of 'Political Space'*, London: Routledge
- Redclift, Victoria (2015) 'Displacement, integration and identity in the postcolonial world', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 23 (2): 117-135