

Beyond Banglatown

Continuity, change and new urban economies in Brick Lane

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Introduction

“ Brick Lane is like a mother – she takes you in and gives you protection and then when you are grown up, she lets you go to discover your own world. ”

These are the words of a Bengali restaurant owner, who in 1969 at the age of 14 left his village in Sylhet in the north-east of what was then East Pakistan and journeyed alone to London in search of a better life. Despite his age, he didn't enter the UK education system but instead found work in some of East London's Bengali-owned 'Indian' restaurants. For a number of years, along with a distant uncle and several other young Bengali men who were also employed in the restaurant trade, 'home' was a small, crowded room in a housing block – now long since demolished – a few yards from where currently

stands the metal arch that signals to any visitor walking north along Osborn Street that they are about to enter Brick Lane.

Brick Lane is no ordinary street. It resonates with the history of migrating groups – home to Huguenots fleeing religious persecution, Irish fleeing the famine, Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia and eastern Europe, to generations of lascars from across the world who disembarked at the nearby imperial docks, to post-war labour migrants from South Asia, including Bengalis, and more latterly their families, many of whom came to the UK to escape the chaos and upheaval around the time of Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971.

Brick Lane has been described by many as the 'heartland' of the Bangladeshi community in Britain, representing five decades of the struggle to belong and be recognized as part of the global city of London and the wider multicultural nation.



Photo: Raju Vaidyanathan

Perhaps the most visible testament to this presence is ‘Banglatown’ – the short stretch of Bangladeshi ‘Indian’ restaurants that crowd the southern end of Brick Lane (Carey, 2004; Alexander, 2011; Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais, 2016). Conceived in the mid-1980s by a coalition of Bangladeshi-born restaurateurs and political activists, in collaboration with the local council and regeneration investors, the aim was to create a cultural quarter in the East End that would replicate, at least in part, the social and economic success of Chinatown in the West End and mark the presence of Bangladeshis locally and nationally. While for some the Banglatown venture fell short of reflecting the full and rich historical and cultural contribution of Bangladeshis to Britain (Alexander, 2011) and has largely come to stand for the restaurant sector alone, nevertheless the Bengali street signs, the Banglatown arch and the street lamps painted in the green and red of the Bangladeshi flag make visible the presence of this small but culturally influential community. The renaming of the local ward as ‘Spitalfields and Banglatown’ in 2002 and the annual Boishakhi Mela, which is the second-largest street festival in Europe (Alexander, 2019), similarly speak to the political and cultural significance of Banglatown, and of Bengali Brick Lane.

In early 2020, the Bangladeshi presence is still highly visible, but it is also under threat. At its height in the mid-2000s, Banglatown, running from Osborn Street’s intersection with Whitechapel High Street to the Truman Brewery site, which bisects the road, was home to around 60 outlets selling Indian-, Bangladeshi- or Punjabi-style food (Carey, 2004; Alexander, 2011). That number of eateries eclipsed any comparable restaurant cluster in Birmingham, Bradford or Manchester by some margin. Today, however, the same section hosts only 23 South Asian-owned restaurants and cafés focused on

curry – a decrease of 62 per cent in 15 years. At the same time, and not coincidentally, the northern end of Brick Lane, from the Truman Brewery site to Bethnal Green Road and Shoreditch High Street, has been transformed into an upmarket mixture of trendy cafés, vintage clothes shops, delicatessens and boutique chocolatiers, and it is steadily encroaching south into the heart of Banglatown itself. The future of Bengali Brick Lane looks increasingly uncertain.

The crisis facing Banglatown encapsulates a longer, broader and deeper set of concerns around migration and settlement; urban change and gentrification; global cities and ordinary streets (Hall, 2015; Hall, King and Finlay, 2017); changing consumer practices; and minority ethnic businesses and ethnic and intergenerational transformation. At the same time, the story of Banglatown, and of Bengali Brick Lane,¹ is a very specific, local and even intimate story of a generation of migrant pioneers, of the struggle for space and recognition, and of community, family and personal change. And it is a story, too, of the street itself, and its iconic place within London and Britain’s history of migration.

Since 2018, the ‘Beyond Banglatown’ research project² has been tracing the changing fortunes of Banglatown’s restaurants, and the implications of this change for the Bangladeshi community in East London and for Brick Lane itself. Banglatown is an important and integral part of both Brick Lane’s history and the history of the Bangladeshi community in Britain. More than this, however, it provides a lens onto a vibrant but little known history – of the East End, of London, of Britain and its former Empire – which is one strand in the tapestry of modern multicultural, post-imperial Britain.

This, then, is a Brick Lane story. A London story. And a story of Britain.

¹ We use ‘Banglatown’ to refer specifically to the development of the restaurant sector from the late 1980s onwards, and ‘Bengali Brick Lane’ to refer to the longer and wider history and presence of Bangladeshis in and around the street.

² AHRC: AH/R007500/1: ‘Beyond Banglatown: Continuity, change and new urban economies in Brick Lane’.

The 'Indian' restaurant sector in the UK



Photo: Raju Vaidyanathan

At the start of 2010, the 'Indian' restaurant and takeaway sector was one of the fastest-growing food retail sectors in the UK. Today, it is estimated that it is worth £3.5 billion (rising to £4.3 billion if outside catering and supermarket sales are added). The sector includes around 10,000 small businesses, of which 80 per cent are Bangladeshi-owned, employing around 80,000 people (*Curry Life* magazine, personal communication).

In the early 2000s, when Britain was briefly in love with idea of multiculturalism (as in New Labour's 'Cool Britannia' brand), the 'Indian' restaurant trade was celebrated as a success story of multicultural Britain (Al-Jazeera, 2018), with foreign secretary Robin Cook famously claiming in 2001 that 'Chicken Tikka Masala is now Britain's true national dish ... a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences' (Cook, 2001) – although it was reported in 2011 that the dish has now been overtaken by chicken jalfrezi (Langley, 2011).

'Indian' restaurants and takeaways can be found in every corner of the UK, from the iconic urban curry quarters in Manchester, Birmingham and Bradford to the small high street takeaway businesses in towns and villages, while 'Indian' chilled and frozen foods have become a popular everyday staple in all major supermarket chains.

The Indian restaurant trade has its roots in British imperialism, and the mass movement of peoples and goods around the world, notably by sea, which accompanied the imperial project. The trade in Britain itself began in the Bengali 'coffee shops' that opened to cater to early Asian migrants, many of whom travelled to Britain along the sea routes of the merchant navy from the 1800s onwards – as 'ayahs, lascars and princes', as Rozina Visram's (2001) book puts it. This is one reason for the long history of Indian restaurants in East London, which sprang up alongside the lodging houses around the docks, catering to sailors. Although curry

and rice had been served in some restaurants in London's Haymarket and Piccadilly since the 1730s, the first dedicated Indian restaurant catering to British diners, the Hindoostane Coffee House, was opened at 34 George Street, Mayfair, in 1809 by Sake Dean Mahomed, the son of a Bengali army officer – although its success was short-lived. Indian restaurants, such as Shafi's in Soho or Veeraswamy's in Regent Street, became a feature of the London landscape from the 1920s onwards, often catering to an ex-pat colonial English clientele as well as to Indian students (Adams, 1987). The first Sylheti-owned restaurant opened in 1938, when Shah Abdul Majid Qureshi took over the Dilkush in Windmill Street, Soho, although it was destroyed during the Blitz in 1940. Adams notes that by 1946 there were 20 such restaurants in London. By 1960, this number had increased to 300 across the country (Adams, 1987). Panikos Panayi notes that the number of 'Indian' restaurants expanded dramatically in the next three decades, with 'around 3000 by the early 1980s and 7516 by 1998, including 1431 in London' (Panayi, 2020: 245).

Despite its name, since the 1980s the 'Indian' restaurant sector has been dominated by Bangladeshis, who make up an estimated 80 per cent of the businesses and workforce. Over 60 per cent of Bangladeshi men and 30 per cent of Bangladeshi women in the UK are employed in the hotel and catering sectors, with over a quarter of Bangladeshi men employed as chefs, cooks or waiters and with high levels of self-employment (Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais, 2016). Panayi notes, 'In 1995 Bangladeshis owned 7000 of the 8000 Indian restaurants in the United Kingdom, while by the end of the 1990s there were 70,000 Bangladeshi waiters and cooks on a nationwide scale' (2020: 245). The popularity of the sector can be seen both in the development of iconic curry quarters, including Banglatown but also the 'Curry Mile' in Manchester, Birmingham's 'Balti Triangle' and Bradford's 'Curry Capital' (which reflect the dominance of local Pakistani/Kashmiri communities), and in the exponential growth and spread of Bangladeshi-owned takeaways and restaurants across the country.

The new millennium has, however, seen a number of challenges to the traditional 'Indian' restaurant

trade, which we explore below through the lens of Banglatown. First, migration controls have caused significant problems for the sector in terms of recruiting skilled chefs from the subcontinent, combined with the reluctance of younger British Bangladeshis to enter the sector, due to its poor working conditions and their improved educational attainment and employment prospects (Alexander and Shankley, 2020). Second, there has been a diversification of the sector, including high-end restaurants, popular 'street food' style chains (such as Dishoom) and the growth of South Asian regional cuisines such as South Indian or Gujarati, alongside the explosion of consumer interest in newer, 'healthier' East Asian cuisines. At the same time, the growth of the 'brown pound' among increasingly affluent British Asians has seen the search for alternatives to the traditional red-flocked atmosphere of the classic Bangladeshi curry houses, leading to the growth of less ethnically marked, more globally oriented businesses (inflected often through religion), such as shisha bars and dessert cafés. Third, and related to both of the above, changing patterns of migration to the UK have seen the 'super-diversification' of settlement in global cities like London. This is reflected most dramatically and visibly on high streets, or what Suzi Hall terms 'everyday streets', particularly in food retail outlets (Zukin, Kasinitz and Chen, 2015). Fourth, processes of urban change, local planning constraints and gentrification have led to many restaurants, already in a notoriously unpredictable and unstable sector, being priced out of the market due to spiralling rents and business rates as well as changing consumer practices, which have led to the demise of traditional high street retail (Vaughan et al., 2018; ONS, 2019).

While the future of the 'Indian' restaurant sector is of concern nationally – and not least because of the concentration of Bangladeshis in this trade – the pressures are particularly apparent and acute in relation to Brick Lane, where the very future of Banglatown is in question. In addition, while some insights can be drawn from the Banglatown experience regarding the sector as a whole, there are historical, cultural and social resonances specific to Bengali Brick Lane which are crucial to understanding the impact of change in the area, and its implications for the British Bangladeshi community, the city and, indeed, the nation.

About the study

The project 'Beyond Banglatown', which took place from July 2018 to June 2020, grew out of a larger piece of research on 'The Bengal Diaspora' (2006–09),³ which explored Muslim migration from the north-eastern Indian state of Bengal in the period after partition. It is estimated that over 20 million people migrated, or were displaced, during this period, with about 2 per cent relocating overseas – most notably to the Middle East and Britain. The project focused on archival and oral history accounts of Muslim migration on both sides of the India–Bangladesh border, and in Britain, and explored how the 'big' histories of migration, partition, war, decolonization and climate change shape, and are shaped by, the lives and experiences of migration 'from below' – the hundreds of thousands of 'little' histories of individuals, families and communities.

In Britain, the project focused on four field sites: Tower Hamlets (where Brick Lane is situated) and Oldham (Greater Manchester), both areas where Bangladeshis are concentrated; and two 'border areas', Newham (outer east London), and a dispersed network of brides and restaurant workers, to capture the movement of this highly mobile and changing community (Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais, 2016; see www.banglastories.org). As part of this project, Alexander was interested in the iconic status of Brick Lane as the 'heartland of the Bangladeshi community' (2011) and of the significance of Banglatown and the restaurants to the area. Through this work, she met Seán Carey, a cultural anthropologist who had worked in Brick Lane for over 20 years and had produced a seminal report on the restaurant trade, *Curry Capital*, in 2004. Carey introduced her to a number of restaurant owners and cultural and political activists in the area, and the genesis of an ethnographic study of the restaurant trade in Brick Lane was formed. At that time – 2008 – Banglatown was probably almost at its height, although challenges were already becoming apparent (Alexander, 2011); by the time we obtained funding for the current project, a decade (and several attempts) later, its decline was steep and stark. The project focus shifted inevitably from a celebration of a community history of struggle and success to the broader and shifting economic, social and political context in which these successes were fast

unravelling. The task became one of archiving this history, and the stories of the individuals who shaped it, before it disappeared, of exploring the causes of its demise, and reflecting on what might be lost and what preserved.

The project took a multidisciplinary and multi-scalar approach, which brought together two urban sociologists (Alexander and Hall), a historian (Lidher), a cultural anthropologist (Carey) and an architect (King) to explore the history and contemporary landscape of Brick Lane, with a particular focus on the Bangladeshi 'Indian' restaurants. The aim was to 'map' Brick Lane, literally, historically and imaginatively, on three interconnected levels. First, we used national and local archival resources to explore the history of Bengali migration to Britain and to East London. This was focused on three phases: the imperial links, policies and practices which shaped Bengali migration to and settlement in the area, particularly focusing on labour migration and the early involvement in the food industry (1800s to 1960s); the settlement of Bangladeshis in Brick Lane and surrounding areas, and the anti-racist struggle and political activism which laid the foundation for the development of the Banglatown project (1970s to 1990s); and the development of Banglatown from the late 1980s onwards.

Second, using Hall and King's innovative visual mapping methodology (Hall, King and Finlay, 2015), we examined contemporary business use along the length of Brick Lane, from Whitechapel High Street up to Bethnal Green Road. We began with a face-to-face survey over October 2018 and July 2019 and recorded 191 units, 18 of which were vacant. A face-to-face survey with shop proprietors and employees within 79 of these units allowed us to document retail and commercial activities, from recent pop-up restaurants to longstanding Bangladeshi restaurants and convenience stores. We divided our survey into two halves, with the dividing line at Hanbury Street, just south of the Truman Brewery. This allowed us to see not only how commercial activity is currently shaped, but also how the curry restaurants on Brick Lane have changed since 2014. We also examined how the street is placed in relation to broader planning and gentrification processes in the area.

³ AHRC: AH/E501540/1; 'The Bengal Diaspora'.

Third, we conducted ethnographic research on, and in, the Bangladeshi restaurants in Brick Lane, between September 2018 and February 2020. This comprised three parts: an updated and expanded repeat of Carey's 2004 qualitative survey, with 13 restaurateurs (representing 14 restaurants);⁴ a series of in-depth interviews with longstanding restaurant owners, former restaurant owners and key stakeholders who had played a significant role in shaping the development of Banglatown; and participant observation in the restaurants and cafés along Brick Lane, to observe everyday practices such as opening and closing times, changes in the pattern of service throughout the day and what local

Bangladeshis refer to as 'pulling customers' – that is, the practice of touting outside restaurants at peak times of customer footfall.

The fieldwork was designed to develop what might be described as a four-dimensional portrait of Brick Lane and Banglatown, which explores the contemporary context of the street (length and breadth), its people, their views, emotional attachments and experiences (depth), and change over time (both individual and social-historical). Through these multiple dimensions, the aim was to capture some of the complexity of Brick Lane and Banglatown at a moment of transformation and uncertainty.

⁴ Interestingly, only four owners (owning five restaurants) of businesses in Brick Lane and Osborn Street had also been included in Carey's 2004 study. This pattern revealed that the vast majority of businesses had changed hands in the intervening 15 years.

A brief history of Bengali Brick Lane/Banglatown

Brick Lane occupies an iconic space in the history and contemporary present of the Bangladeshi community in Britain. The 2011 Census recorded 451,529 Bangladeshi-descent people in Britain (Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais, 2016), 90 per cent of whom self-identified as Muslims and 95 per cent of whom have their roots in the north-eastern division of Sylhet, in Bangladesh. Around half of British Bangladeshis live in London, with other sizeable regional clusters in the West Midlands and Greater Manchester (Alexander Chatterji and Jalais, 2016). The London Borough of Tower Hamlets in East London, in which Brick Lane is located, is home to the largest concentration of Bangladeshis in England and Wales. Census data from 2011 recorded that 32 per cent of the borough's total population was of Bangladeshi ethnicity (born either in the UK or outside the UK), and that 15 per cent of the borough's population was born in Bangladesh (LB Tower Hamlets, 2013, 2018a). In 2011, 41 per cent of the Spitalfields and Banglatown ward population, where Brick Lane sits, was of Bangladeshi ethnicity; 57 per cent of the borough's children (aged 0 to 15) were of Bangladeshi descent, making up the majority of the school population (63 per cent), and 18 per cent of residents cited Bengali as their main language (LB Tower Hamlets, 2017, 2018a, 2018d).

Across the borough, enormous poverty exists alongside enormous wealth. Despite boasting some of the fastest economic growth in the country and 'pockets of high earners', Tower Hamlets is the 10th-most-deprived local authority in England, with four in ten households living below the poverty line (LB Tower Hamlets, 2018b, 2019: 3). Bangladeshis are among the borough's most disadvantaged groups. They have the lowest employment rates of all ethnic groups in Tower Hamlets and, once in work, tend to be over-represented in part-time and lower-paid occupations (LB Tower Hamlets, 2018b, 2018c). However, educational attainment among British Bangladeshis in the borough has improved dramatically (Alexander and Shankley, 2020), which has had knock-on effects for the restaurant trade.

The Bengali/Bangladeshi/Sylheti connection with East London can be traced back to the 17th century, first through links with the East India Company, and later through imperial trading routes. The East End's docks – 'a conduit in an imperial economy' (Jacobs,

1996: 73) – handled goods traded between British colonies, including, by the 1850s, tea grown on Sylheti plantations and jute processed in the mills of Calcutta (Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais, 2016). Along with goods came people, and Indian sailors, known as lascars, were among the earliest settlers. From the 17th century, Sylheti lascars were employed as deck-hands and cooks on East India Company ships. From the mid-19th century, lascars were crucial in the workforce of the imperial merchant marine (Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais, 2016). By the 1850s, between 5000 and 6000 lascars were employed on ships sailing to Britain every year, and by 1938, over 50,700 lascars crewed British merchant ships worldwide, often in hazardous conditions and for poor pay (Adams, 1987; Visram, 2002; Wemyss, 2006). When their ships docked in London, some were abandoned by their employers while others jumped ship to find better livelihoods on shore. In the 1920s, these men were joined by a growing, but small, number of ex-lascars who settled in East London following service in the First World War (Adams, 1987; Visram, 2002). Forging livelihoods as pedlars, kitchen porters, cooks and tailors in the Jewish-owned clothing trade, these British subjects established the first small Sylheti community in East London (Adams, 1987; Visram, 2002). Coffee houses serving the sailors sprang up in the area. The most influential restaurateur in this early period was Ayub Ali Master (1900–80), who owned a number of lodging houses for seamen on the City fringe. In 1942, he opened Ayub Ali's Dining Room at 76 Commercial Street, near Brick Lane. This was soon rebranded as The Shahjalal Restaurant to attract the steadily increasing number of Bengalis who had settled in the area after the Second World War (Ahmed, forthcoming).

The aftermath of Indian independence and partition in 1947, which ended British rule and created the independent state of Pakistan, witnessed the migration of greater numbers of Bengalis to Britain in search of work. By the late 1940s, there were several Sylheti-owned coffee shops selling hot drinks and snacks in Brick Lane, catering to these early migrants. However, the first important café of the modern era was the Star Café, which was established at 66 Brick Lane in 1958 by Lahore-born Abdul Rezak, and which closed a decade later. A close relative of Rezak, one of our respondents,



Photo: Raju Vaidyanathan

recalls that the Star Café opened at 9am and closed at 8pm every day of the week. The café's main customers were Bengalis and other South Asian men who lived in what was still a predominantly Jewish residential area. The respondent added:

There were just two curries at that time – there was chicken or meat curry, and rice or chapatis or paratha. And I can still remember meat curry was one shilling and sixpence, chicken curry was two shillings and sixpence. And these were mostly kosher foods ... when we came to this country there was no halal meat, so we ate kosher. It's the same as halal – the Jews are our cousins.

Undoubtedly the most significant figure in the development of Brick Lane's curry trade was the charismatic Musa Patel (1939–96). Patel arrived in 1957 and opened the Bombay Restaurant at 166 Brick Lane in 1959 (Ahmed, forthcoming). Like the Star Café, the Bombay Restaurant targeted single South Asian men living or working in the area. Building on his initial success, Patel opened Brick Lane's first licensed restaurant, The Clifton, named after the fashionable seaside area of Karachi where he was born, at 124 Brick Lane in 1967. The Clifton had an all-male, diverse workforce that included Bengalis, Punjabis and Keralans, the last group

providing most of the kitchen service. A former employee of Patel, a Sylheti, told us:

Musa's Clifton was well known, you know, very well known. And in that time, Fay Maschler in the Evening Standard wrote a big article on him. And there was a radio [station] – I forgot the name of the radio, Asian radio – they say, 'If you don't see The Clifton, then you don't see The London.' And you know Benazir Bhutto? She used to come here – and Imran Khan, too. When they were students at Oxford, they used to come here to have biryani. And Benazir, like Musa, was from Karachi. I'd say Musa was like a father figure to her – she used to call him 'uncle'.

While early migrants worked in the cotton, textile and steel mills across the country, changes to the industrial base in the 1970s, and increasing unemployment, saw many Bangladeshis move to Tower Hamlets (Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais, 2016), where there was a small but long-established community of Bengalis working in the largely Jewish-owned 'rag trade' as machinists, pressers and tailors (Carey and Shukur, 1985). At the same time, there was an increase in Bangladeshi migration to the UK from the mid-1970s onwards, which saw the numbers rise from around 5000 in the early 1960s to an estimated 200,000 by the 1980s. This was

led partly by insecurity and hardship at home, in the decade after independence, and a process of family reunification precipitated by increasingly harsh immigration legislation in the UK, which effectively stopped circular migration between the UK and Bangladesh. Through the 1970s and 1980s, the East End was an extremely hostile environment for non-white settlers and the community had to struggle against violent racism and discrimination in housing, education and employment. The racist murder of tailor Altab Ali in 1978 saw the emergence of Bangladeshi youth organizations, which mobilized the local community to chase out the National Front from the areas around Brick Lane (Ullah and Eversley, 2010; Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais, 2016). Bangladeshis also challenged structural discrimination in local authority housing policies through the Bangladeshi squatters' movement in Spitalfields in the late 1970s and the housing lobbies of the 1980s (Begum, 2004). Many of these activists entered local politics and were successful in being elected to the council, and many were also pioneers in the development of the local restaurant trade.

By 1980, Brick Lane was home to four restaurants and four cafés serving curry. A decade later, the number of cafés, serving local South Asians, remained the same but there were now six restaurants, mainly targeting white, middle-class customers. As the clothing and leather factories in the area declined and unemployment among the Bangladeshi community increased, calls for regeneration investment grew, and Brick Lane's tourist economy and identity as London's 'Curry Capital' emerged in the late 1990s, with the redevelopment of the street as 'Banglatown'.

The Banglatown concept was initially imagined by a small group of local Bangladeshi businessmen, under the banner of the Spitalfields Community Development Group (SCDG) (Fainstein, 1994; Jacobs, 1996; Shaw, Bagwell and Karmowska, 2004). Inspired by London's Chinatown, their community-oriented vision included plans for a 'Banglatown' shopping centre selling Bangladeshi food and crafts, more social housing, and land for a community trust. While SCDG's plans stalled, in the early 1990s the council, in partnership with local businesses and third sector organizations, successfully bid for government regeneration grants to facilitate the development of Brick Lane into an 'Emerging Cultural Quarter' (Shaw and Bagwell, 2012). The City Challenge scheme, which ran from 1991 to 1996, was worth £7.5 million a year for five years (Fainstein, 1994). Its successor scheme, the Single Regeneration Budget (1994–2007), which

operated locally through partnerships between the Borough of Tower Hamlets and the City Fringe Partnership (1997–2002) and Cityside (1997–2004), had a total programme spend of approximately £42 million in the area (Begum, 2004; Shaw and Bagwell, 2012; Fioretti and Briata, 2019). These schemes sought to redevelop Brick Lane, along with Whitechapel Art Gallery and the Rich Mix centre, as a cultural destination for young and affluent visitors from nearby offices and other parts of London; to strengthen the area's links with the City; and to encourage diversification of the local economy. One respondent – one of four partners who formerly owned a renowned Bangladeshi music shop in Brick Lane – recalled how they all came to enter the hospitality sector:

We were having a hard time of it. Then someone suggested we start a restaurant. Really, we didn't know anything about running one, but we thought we'd give it a go as there was a chef available. We opened in 1999 and we're still here all these years later.

Rather than create a Bangladeshi as an 'ethnic enclave' like Chinatown, the aim was to draw on Brick Lane's diversity and distinctiveness to create a 'corporate creative culture' in the area, oriented towards an external, tourist market (Begum, 2004; NESTA, 2010). The Banglatown development brought 'Eastern'-style gateways to the street, painted street lamps, measures for increased public safety, and grants to upgrade the facades of existing shops and restaurants and business advice for their owners (Shaw and Bagwell, 2012). The Banglatown brand was used as a marketing tool to promote new annual street festivals on Brick Lane: the Boishakhi Mela, the Brick Lane Festival and the Curry Festival (Alexander, 2019). In 1999, Tower Hamlets Council officially named the area around Brick Lane 'Banglatown' and in 2001, the electoral ward of Spitalfields became 'Spitalfields and Banglatown' (Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais, 2016). In 1999, the borough's planning office also permitted the conversion of shops in the central section of Brick Lane into restaurants, designating the area a 'Restaurant Zone' (Shaw and Bagwell, 2012). The latter development prompted a boom in the number of Bengali-owned 'Indian' restaurants. By 2003, there were 46 such establishments, and at its peak, the number of 'Indian' restaurants on and around the southern end of Brick Lane reached over 60 (Carey, 2004).

While these numbers suggest that regeneration schemes provided a much-needed economic boost to local Bangladeshi restaurateurs and cultural

recognition for the wider Bengali community in the area, its subsequent history suggests that the success of Banglatown was more fragile than might have been hoped. Today, the curry houses of 'Banglatown' are interspersed with Swedish delicatessens, French patisseries, pizza parlours and vegan cafés. The site of the original Clifton restaurant is now occupied by a branch of a designer chocolate shop. The 'Clifton' name was bought by a local Bangladeshi restaurateur after Musa Patel's death in 1996, and the restaurant was re-established

in a different location, though it too has since been replaced by Efes, a Turkish restaurant – one of a six-strong chain in London.

As the contemporary context shows, and as we discuss in the next section, new waves of generation, investment and demographic change have profoundly damaged the Banglatown project, and have largely left the Bangladeshi restaurant pioneers and the wider community behind.

The changing face of Brick Lane: regeneration and new urban economies

Alongside its rich and complex history, contemporary Brick Lane is an area of pronounced urban change, shaped by a number of redevelopment initiatives that have altered the urban fabric of the area. The introduction of a new range of activities and actors to the wider area and the regeneration of neglected businesses at the northern end have also led to the displacement of established businesses, such as those in Banglatown, at the southern end of the street. The London Mayor's metropolitan-wide *London Plan*, developed from 2003 onwards (GLA, 2004), outlines key development opportunities and associated strategic sites across the city, one of which includes land at the northern end of Brick Lane as well as land to the left of the Lane – sites which have undergone substantial changes in land use, ownership and clientele (Figure 1).

At the borough level, Tower Hamlets Council has established a 'City Fringe Area Action Plan' (LB Tower Hamlets, 2007) designating Brick Lane as a tourist area, with the Truman Brewery and more recent retail activities marked for its 'creative and cultural focus'. Alongside the planned redevelopment of large-scale land parcels, there has been significant public investment in transportation infrastructure, and the reconstitution of Shoreditch High Street Station has drawn pedestrian flows to the northern end of Brick Lane and away from Aldgate East at the southern end. These shifts can be seen in the changing urban economies on Brick Lane as described by a local planning officer:

*Brick Lane is very much composed of different parts. The southern half of Brick Lane leading towards Whitechapel High Street is one zone, and the other, the northern end towards Bethnal Green Road, is very gentrified. The Truman Brewery moving in has had a lot of impact. The quality of businesses they brought in, their workspace, their support for graduates and for undergraduates, their support for fashion with the London Fashion Week, has really helped create a buzz. And there are the markets that operate as well on a Sunday, through the Support Brick Lane Market initiative run by the Council. **I think the rest of Brick Lane, leading towards Osborn Street, has suffered.** (Our emphasis)*

Our street mapping found that the majority of units are independent (91 per cent) and that most proprietors rent their premises (86 per cent). There

is a mixture of long-established shops dating as far back as 1936 and more recent arrivals as new as two weeks old. While 56 per cent of shops have been on the street for 10 years or more, 44 per cent have been on the street for five years or less, suggesting a shift away from the traditional curry houses which, as Figure 2 shows, have declined dramatically in the last five years. The survey showed that 80 per cent of the curry houses which had closed had been replaced with other food retail establishments.

Over the year of our survey period, we noted a turnover of shops, particularly in the southern end of the street, within the same category (i.e. changes from one kind of food offering to another). While the northern end of Brick Lane is marked out by 'high-end' retailers, selling comparatively expensive goods and services, ranging from the controversial Cereal Killer Café and well-known vintage clothing shops such as Hunky Dory and Brick Lane Vintage Market, the southern end, which contains most of the remaining Bangladeshi restaurants, also has an emerging market of food retailers that are more affordable, as well those as specializing in foods oriented towards emerging health and dietary trends, such as vegan food outlets. Mapping shifts in retail from 2014 to 2018, it is evident that a significant portion of the street's ground-floor retail activities are still oriented to food and drink (43 per cent), with a growing market in hair and beauty services (5 per cent) (Figure 3).

Our survey revealed a range of different retail uses along Brick Lane across its northern and southern parts (Figure 4). Like many of London's high streets, Brick Lane is a collection of tightly fronted shops with a mixture of uses on the upper floors. Historically the upper floors were designated at Class A – a planning designation that stipulates the premises as housing a professional service provided to the public and business communities, including the sale of goods or services in shops. However, today, due to the demand for more housing and the lucrative residential market, Brick Lane has seen a huge increase in planning applications to change the class use of upper floors to residential dwellings. The dramatic shifts in residential property prices accompanied by steep increases in housing rentals suggest that such alterations in use will further add to the influx

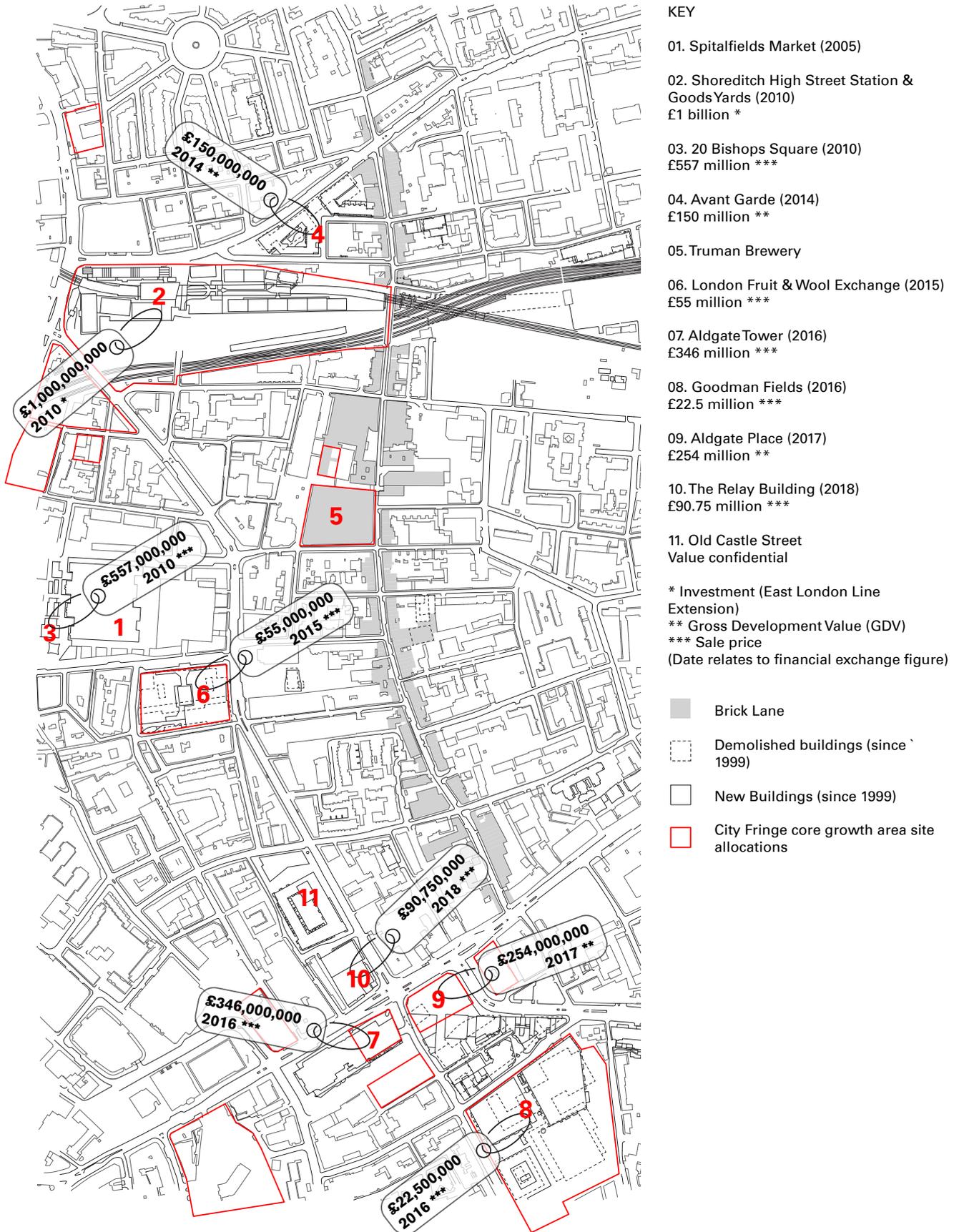


Figure 1: Large-scale shifts in investment around Brick Lane. The investment figures reflect varying categorizations: investment (by the state), gross development value (what the development project may be worth on the open market once completed) and sale price. This mapping highlights two important characteristics: (i) the transformation of the built environment by large-scale development processes as opposed to piecemeal change and (ii) the huge amount of global capital funding this change. See Appendix for sources.



Figure 2. The shifting nature of the Bangladeshi restaurants. In 2014, there were 35 curry restaurants on Brick Lane all clustered south of Truman Brewery. By 2019, this had dropped to 20 (and three cafés).

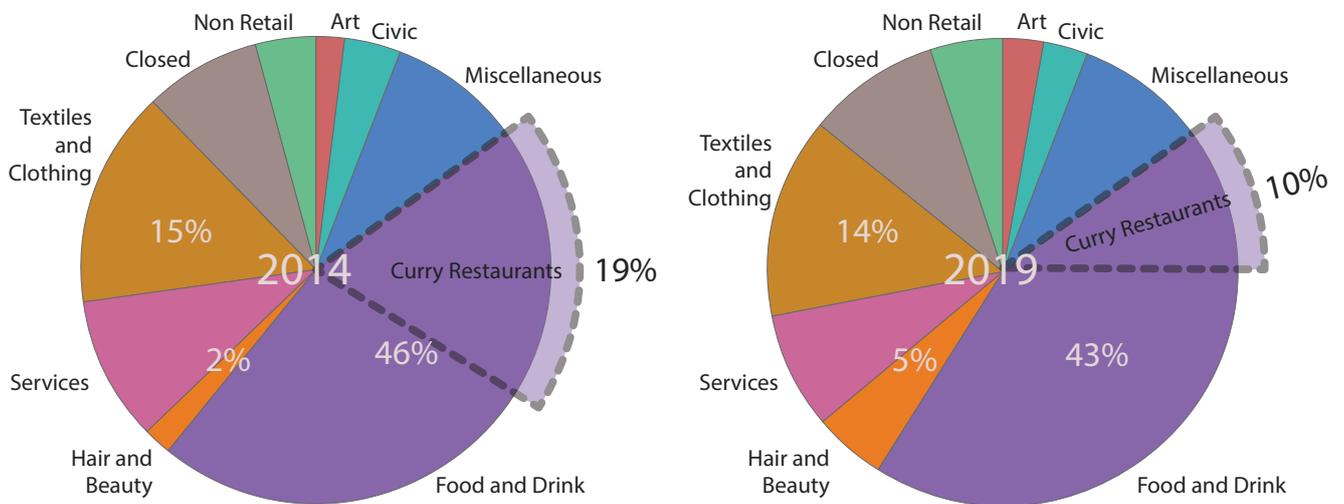


Figure 3. Changing retail activity along Brick Lane



- Non-Retail**
 - Offices
 - Hotel
 - Residential

- Civic**
 - Schools
 - Cultural Institutions
 - Charities

- Miscellaneous**
 - Betting
 - Bookstore
 - General Store
 - Music
 - Mixed Use
 - Sport
 - Home décor

- Food & Drink**
 - Food (Sweets & Deserts)
 - Night Economy (Bars)
 - Off-License
 - Restaurant
 - Restaurant Bangladeshi
 - Restaurant Asian
 - Supermarket

- Services**
 - Estate Agent
 - Mobile & Technology
 - Money Transfer & Bank
 - Travel Agent
 - Printing

- Art Related**
 - Gallery
 - Framers
 - Printing

- Health & Beauty**
 - Hair Salon
 - Nail Bar
 - Health
 - Spa

- Textiles & Clothing**
 - Clothing
 - Wholesale textiles
 - Wedding

- Closed**

Figure 4. The range of uses on Brick Lane.

of higher-income residents, accompanied by the dispersal of existing residents to suburbs on London's more affordable peripheries.

Along Brick Lane, a niche economy has come to the fore, supported by high 'footfall' and a strong presence of tourism, as well as a markedly changing demographic. Many of the niche stores are oriented to either the visitor or a changing demographic that includes an expanding student population as well as middle-class consumers. These niche stores all capitalize on a distinctive offer and work with a strong aesthetic presence both on the street and on the web.

Three trends can be identified in the transformation of Brick Lane: the first is exemplified by the chocolatier Dark Sugars, which has two outlets on Brick Lane, and grew from an experimental market stall in nearby Spitalfields Market. Dark Sugars opened its first shop in 2013, at the northern end of Brick Lane, and a second in 2015, on the site of the former, iconic,

Clifton restaurant. Chocolates are both manufactured and sold on the street, with a single small bite priced at around £1. A second trend is the transformation of older curry houses into new restaurants, often under the same ownership. One example is the hybrid La Casita Mexicana/Quito restaurant, which offered Mexican/Japanese food (and in January 2020 was transformed again, into a Korean restaurant). A third trend is directed towards the student/hipster demographic in the area, such as the vegan café that sells affordable, 'healthy' food that addresses changing dietary preferences. The café serves Italian/Korean fusion vegan fare such as pasta and kimchi, reflecting a wider shift towards fusion food.

The challenge to the traditional Bangladeshi curry houses is how to survive and adapt in this fast changing marketplace. And the question remains: what is the future of Banglatown, if the curry houses are disappearing in the midst of this new wave of regeneration?

Banglatown 2020: challenges, threats and transformations

When we started our fieldwork in September 2018 there were 25 Bangladeshi or 'Indian' restaurants and cafés in Brick Lane and Osborn Street. Eighteen months later, in February 2020, there were 23. During the fieldwork, one restaurant in Brick Lane and two cafés in Osborn Street closed in 2019, while one café opened in Brick Lane in the same year. This was a significant drop from the peak of just under 60 outlets on Brick Lane and Osborn Street in 2008. Nevertheless, the number of restaurants and cafés serving curry in Brick Lane appears to have stabilized – at least for the time being – amid the broader transformations discussed above.

Our survey of 14 Brick Lane and Osborn Street 'Indian' restaurants and cafés discovered that 10 out of 13 owners (one owner owned two restaurants) and almost all of their 106 employees (104 male, 2 female) lived in Tower Hamlets. Twelve owners self-identified as Bangladeshi or British Bangladeshi and one as Pakistani. All respondents self-identified as Muslim. Nine out of the 14 eateries were open 365 days a year, though only two restaurants were routinely open after midnight. Subsequent in-depth interviews additionally revealed that much of the produce required for the restaurants and cafés was sourced at local stores, such as Bangla Town Cash & Carry, Taj Stores or Zaman Bros. This was economically important in terms of the local multiplier effect, but also as part of the sense of community 'ownership' of a socially and culturally inclusive Banglatown. As one respondent commented:

Brick Lane is very important for us [Tower Hamlets] Bangladeshis – we feel safe here and it's where other Bengalis come and visit. Other people come from all over the world to Brick Lane also. It's near the City too – so people are mixing and that's a good thing. They can see the [Muslim] religion and learn something about our culture.

In our survey, five respondents reported that the six businesses they owned were profitable, four were breaking even and four were losing money. Average weekly turnover for restaurants ranged from £2500 to £9300, while for cafés it ranged from £1600 to

£3500. However, many respondents, even those running profitable businesses, were cautious about what the future might hold because of the seemingly inexorable rise in rents and business rates and the increasing costs of food and drink. It was also evident that restaurateurs were concerned about increasing levels of economic competition in the area and the impact on profit margins. As one said:

Before, you came to Brick Lane for a curry and that was it. But now you've got all sorts of businesses with different styles. So, people have more choices now – for example, you've got the pizza places and the food courts. And Café 1001 is open every day as well. You've also got Boxpark and chains like Nando's and KFC have moved in. The council shouldn't allow any further competition – it should keep the number of restaurants the same as it is now.

It was revealing, furthermore, that only two respondents were confident that their businesses would be open in a decade's time. The remainder, while convinced that their restaurants or cafés would be trading in one year's time, were uncertain whether they would continue to do so in five or ten years' time. Overall, many restaurateurs were pessimistic about the future of the curry sector in Brick Lane.

We explore below some of the key challenges identified by our respondents and key stakeholders.

Freehold/leasehold

A key issue for restaurant owners was the cost of property in the area, in the wake of increasing gentrification and development. Average property prices in the Brick Lane area in 2020 are 20 per cent above the London average and continue to rise, with the average sold price in Brick Lane increasing by 31 per cent between 2019 and 2020.⁵ This makes freehold purchase almost impossible, while across the area there is a growing market in short-term rentals, promoted in part by student requirements for limited residential leases and by the expansion of tourism, with 15 Airbnb rentals estimated for every 100 properties on Brick Lane in 2018.

⁵ This is based on Land Registry data. The Foxton's 'Instant Valuation' calculator marks the Brick Lane area with Shoreditch High Street to the north, Whitechapel Road to the south, Vallance Road to the east and Commercial Road to the west: www.foxtons.co.uk/living-in/brick-lane/

Case Study – Shams Uddin Restaurateur



Photo: Andrew Walker, Periscope Design Agency

Shams Uddin is Brick Lane's longest-serving restaurateur. He was born into a family of rice farmers in Biswanath, Sylhet, but his father passed away when he was a young boy. Life was hard.

Shams came to the UK at the age of 16 in 1976, 'with my uncle, a friend of the family from the same village', in pursuit of a better life. Through contacts, he found somewhere to live in Princelet Street, just off Brick Lane. Like other young Bangladeshi men, Shams found employment in the leather trade. The money was good, but the work didn't suit him, especially as the fumes that often filled the workshop affected his breathing. In the summer of 1978, Shams encountered Musa Patel at the latter's confectionery shop in Brick Lane. Musa then offered him a job at his Clifton restaurant and Shams began work as a waiter and bartender. From 1981 onward, however, Musa would sometimes ask him to help in the kitchen if there was a staff shortage. 'I liked it – I found I was good at it', says Shams. Those experiences, he thinks, made him into something of a restaurant all-rounder.

Shortly before his death from blood cancer in 1996, Musa advised Shams to think seriously about his future. He recalls: 'One day Musa said to me, "Why don't you do something for yourself? You know at some point there are going to be new people here [The Clifton], and they won't understand you and you won't understand them." I thought that was good advice, so I started to look for other opportunities.'

Subsequently, Shams became a partner in two Brick Lane restaurants. However, he soon became disillusioned with partnerships and sold his shares. He then found a dilapidated building in 1999, which had been previously operated as a Pakistani-owned leather wholesaler. 'Everything was falling down, the roof was leaking, but I thought the place had potential', he says. 'Even though we opened in 2000, it took me two years to get it right, and in that time the landlord didn't ask me for any rent.' Shams decided to name his restaurant The Monsoon, and it is now one of Brick Lane's most popular venues. In mid-March 2020, just before the UK restaurant sector

closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, The Monsoon was ranked as London's 158th-best restaurant on TripAdvisor.

Shams, who lives locally with his family, normally arrives at The Monsoon at 3pm and leaves the restaurant around 2am. He currently employs nine staff members – five in the kitchen and four front-of-house. 'But we are understaffed – we need six in the kitchen and seven to serve customers. I can't get the people. We are working at the limit, especially because I want to maintain quality – that's really important.'

Shams says that the days when a Brick Lane restaurateur could rely on relatives to plug gaps in the business are long gone. 'These days you need proper people, qualified people', he explains. 'But they're not producing enough of them from the catering colleges. I know I'm very lucky that I have a really good full-time chef. You'll find lots of restaurants that can't afford one. Often, a chef will do three or four hours in two or three different restaurants. The owner will pick them up in his car and drop them off somewhere else once they've done their job. Then they start a new shift at another restaurant.' Because of the labour shortage, Shams is in favour of relaxing immigration laws to bring in chefs and other staff from Bangladesh and the subcontinent, but he adds: 'I also want to see British boys and girls if they are willing to learn. I don't just want overseas people. You need to think long-term.'

Brick Lane is very much a dine-in area. However, like many other restaurants The Monsoon also provides a takeaway service (worth a little over 1 per cent of turnover). More recently, Shams, curious to know more about the burgeoning

online food delivery sector and also keen to add a revenue stream, has signed up to Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber Eats – though somewhat reluctantly because of the high transaction costs. 'By the time you've paid for this and that, they've taken 50 per cent', he says. 'And what have they contributed to the making of the food? Zero.'

Like other restaurateurs, Shams claims his business was badly affected by the closure of the Vibe Bar in 2014. To increase trade in Brick Lane, he would like to see the development of a policy that would encourage the opening of new night-time venues. 'The present mayor doesn't seem to have any plan. The council's not doing much either', he says. 'Last Christmas [2019] there was no special lighting on Brick Lane. The street was just a dark, dark place. We need some more bars and clubs on the street because that will attract the people who will soon be coming to work at the new Town Hall in Whitechapel. After work, they'll want to go out and enjoy themselves. But if there aren't any new places, they'll go somewhere else.' Shams thinks that growth for the street's restaurants could also be leveraged by extending opening hours and better connecting with the City's dynamic financial rhythm. 'A huge number of people are working through the night in the City', says Shams, who caters for some of them before The Monsoon closes at 1am. 'They're very easy to serve – they just come and go. They're not making trouble. They're not drinking people, they just want something to eat.'

Brick Lane remains a special place for many older Bangladeshis, including Shams. 'When I left Bangladesh. I came to Brick Lane, and I'm still here more than 40 years later. Without Brick Lane I can say there wouldn't be a Shams.'

A key issue for most restaurant owners was the fact that the majority of businesses are held on a leasehold basis, which has serious implications for spiralling rental costs as the area has been gentrified. Only one of the owners included in our survey owned the freehold to his property; the remaining respondents all operated on leasehold terms. Although we learned from other reliable sources that five Bangladeshi landlords owned the freeholds to seven of the current 22 restaurants and cafés serving curry on Brick Lane, the majority of properties belong to Jewish landlords, descendants of an earlier generation of migrants and

entrepreneurs. As one café owner, who took over sole ownership of a business in 1994, explained:

At that time, I had no money – I hadn't been that long in the UK. A few years later property was really cheap but then I couldn't get a mortgage because interest rates were 8, 9, 10 per cent. Now, the interest rate is 0.75 per cent but you can't buy because the price is so high. A building like this – the whole building – would cost me around £1.5 million. Although the interest is low, you still have to get a deposit together of 25 per cent. But where am I going to get £400,000?

The relationship between Jewish landlords and their Bangladeshi or Pakistani tenants was reported to have traditionally been extremely cordial. One respondent revealed that he was on such good terms with his Stamford Hill-based landlord that the rent for his three-storey building had been kept at £30,000 for the length of his previous 15-year tenancy. However, the landlord's death in 2017 meant that this informal relationship had come to an end. The respondent commented:

I used to have a good relationship with my landlord. We would meet and have a chat. Now his wife owns the property and we have never met. So, I have to pay electronically. And the rent has gone up from £30,000 to £53,000. I used to pay council rates of £14,000 and now that's gone up to nearly £25,000. So, my profit margin has almost completely gone. I don't know how long I can keep going – maybe one or two years before I'm forced to sell the lease. And I can't go anywhere else because everywhere the rent is high now. Same like here – Whitechapel Road, Commercial Road, everywhere. I'm 52 now and I haven't got the stamina I used to have. I can't do another business.

One respondent put the limited options for someone like himself in this way: 'Rates are going sky high every year, so if you're not making money, you'll end up selling the lease.'

Council policy and vision

Our street survey clearly shows the expansion of new food businesses alongside new activities relating to small art galleries and small-scale manufacturing. These shifts in use and users are structural, and the move towards micro-scale 'creative economies' on Brick Lane is also part of a changing borough-led ambition for the street. An officer from Tower Hamlets Council told us:

We want to improve the public realm, improve the lifestyle. We want to create a mix between tourists and local people. It's not easy. There are lots and lots of local businesses, and lots of people starting out. We're in a really good place, with many students. We're really keen to keep them in the area. We are also really keen to look at the historical manufacturing and fashion connections to the area ... We need to make sure people are on social media, that they're using Twitter or Instagram, to highlight their businesses. It's such a competitive market now.

This vision has largely erased or marginalized the Bangladeshi contribution to the area's history and heritage. Indeed, many of the restaurateurs were

critical of the current council, including officers responsible for the management of Brick Lane. For example, one respondent felt that given the amount of money generated by business rates, the council could do more to promote the area by developing an effective marketing strategy, including the return of the popular annual Brick Lane Curry Festival. The respondent added:

I said all this to the officer responsible for the area but I never heard anything back. I haven't seen them for six months ... You need somebody senior to make the decisions that will benefit the businesses. They [the council] spent millions on these [Christmas] lights last year [2018] for the decorations. If they spent a couple of hundred thousand on promoting Brick Lane, you know, as Brick Lane itself, it would bring so much revenue to the area. It would also create more jobs.

One stakeholder, who had worked in regeneration, claimed that compared with other East London boroughs such as Newham and Redbridge, Tower Hamlets had an excessively bureaucratic culture – 'officers responsible for Brick Lane sitting in the Town Hall on the Isle of Dogs' rather than being proactive at street level. The same respondent reflected on their previous experience of being employed to regenerate Brick Lane:

We also were in 9-to-5 jobs, but I used to every now and then walk up and down Brick Lane at night, eating out. At midnight, talking to business owners, talking to employees, saying, 'What's happening? What's this? What's that?' ... That accountability wasn't there before Cityside [regeneration scheme], and it hasn't been there since. And that, I think, is the problem ... the legacy of Tower Hamlets Council not having a focused economic development team for as long as people can remember. You know, economic development doesn't happen overnight. Thinking about concepts and business plans don't develop overnight. If you don't have an economic development team, where do these ideas go? Even if you have a councillor who has an idea, where do they go? It doesn't happen.

Changing markets

Several stakeholders were very self-critical about the sector's ability to adapt, or not, to changing consumer tastes. These respondents thought that restaurateurs' inability to surf the wave of modernity by continuing to serve a traditional Anglo-Bangla menu, lager and wine rather than switching to street food, craft beer and cocktails demonstrated that they were out of touch with the zeitgeist. As

one respondent, a former local stakeholder with a background in hospitality, put it:

It's called the dinosaur effect – if they don't change, they're gone. That's the harsh reality and that's already happening. Those that are changing will stay and those who don't will move out.

Not everyone agreed with this gloomy perspective, however. One community stakeholder thought that some Brick Lane restaurants could survive serving a classic Anglo-Bangla menu – what was called 'English curry' – while others would require help to transform their menus to compete with critically acclaimed local outlets such as Dishoom in nearby Shoreditch or even some of the popular local Indian or Pakistani-owned independent restaurants, such as Hichki, Tayyabs or Needoo Grill. In particular, the respondent thought that the Bangladeshi- and Pakistani-owned cafés that serve authentic, regional 'home-style' food on Brick Lane could attract many more international visitors. The respondent, drawing on his experience of eating out, also said:

When I go to these [Brick Lane café] places, I find that they are very friendly, which is not always the experience I've had at somewhere like Dishoom. And I think, English people and non-English people, people of mixed race, all of them, their sense of – their culinary understanding and their spice understanding – has increased a lot more than a couple of decades ago. People have been to India, they've been to South Asia, they know the differences between the types of food and the complexities within that.

Gentrification and changing consumer practices

A related issue arises from the shifts in the customer base in Brick Lane. This arises from three elements. The first is gentrification and the changing work practices in the financial services sector of the City, which surrounds, and increasingly encroaches on, Brick Lane (Alexander, 2011). Where in the early 1990s City workers crossed Commercial Street to lunch at their favourite Brick Lane restaurant or café, recent changes to working times and practices in the sector have meant that since the early 2000s, significant lunch breaks have become increasingly rare (Carey, 2004). One consequence of this change in working practices (aka 'the death of lunchtime') has been that many companies in the City have expanded or upgraded their canteens. City workers also have an increasing choice of 'grab-and-go' eateries – for example, Costa, Pret

a Manger or Subway, or the growing number of 'street food' stalls in the refurbished Old Spitalfields Market. A curry at a Brick Lane restaurant has become increasingly perceived by time-poor City workers as a 'heavy' meal – something to eat in the evening rather than in the daytime. The absence of lunchtime trade was noted by those Brick Lane restaurateurs who have been in the trade for some years. As one respondent said:

We used to be really busy come 1 o'clock but now there's virtually nothing. I'd say the split in turnover between lunchtime and evening is 1 per cent and 99 per cent. Most weekday lunchtimes we're empty – you're lucky if you get one table.

Second, there has been a shift towards a night-time economy, which has impacted the restaurant trade. The redevelopment of the Truman Brewery site and the opening of the Vibe Bar in 1995 shifted trade to the area from an evening dining to a night-time club economy, drawing a new and younger, predominantly white, middle-class crowd into the area. Positive media coverage of the new late-night leisure spaces in publications such as *City Limits*, *Time Out* and the *Evening Standard*, and increasing house prices, increased tourism and brought affluent well-educated white Europeans to the area.

The success of the Vibe Bar brought forth a significant number of similar venues at the northern end of Brick Lane, later expanding into Shoreditch High Street (see LB Hackney, 2017). The opening of Shoreditch High Street overground station in 2010 meant that while more visitors were coming into the greater Shoreditch area, a smaller proportion than previously entered via Aldgate or Whitechapel. The result was that the centre of the new night-time economy began to drift away from Banglatown in a north-westerly direction, with serious ramifications for the Banglatown businesses.

With the closure of the Vibe Bar in 2014, Bangladeshi and other restaurateurs, now hugely dependent on the late-evening trade, told us that business turnover was badly affected. All of our respondents were convinced that the Vibe Bar's closure was the main reason why so many of Brick Lane's curry restaurants had been forced to shut. One respondent, who owns a restaurant near the Truman Brewery, told us:

After 11 o'clock, there's nobody here. [There] used to be hundreds. Where we're sitting here, Friday, okay, by 5 o'clock, this place would be heaving with people ... It was very good. [The Vibe Bar] was why people used to come in from all over the world, all over the

city. As I said, there has to be an attraction for people to come to Brick Lane. And it was the council's policy to get rid of all the attractions in Brick Lane – clubs, bars, restaurants. But that's what people are looking for in the evening – good restaurants, good bars. Come out for the evening they would, come out and enjoy themselves.

Third, there has been an expansion of the capital's visitor economy, and especially an increase in visitors wanting to locate and experience the 'real London' in non-central or inner-city areas, such as Spitalfields and Banglatown (see Maitland, 2019). It is estimated that some 20 million international tourists, as well as day visitors and other consumers, currently contribute around £15 billion every year to the London economy (Smith, 2019). While café owners, serving traditional Bengali or Punjabi food, reported that the number of tourists visiting their premises was relatively small – between 1 per cent and 10 per cent – by contrast, restaurant owners stated that between 40 per cent and 70 per cent of their customers were tourists. According to restaurant owners, the vast majority of international visitors did not book in advance but preferred to walk along the street before making a decision about where to eat. This explains in part why touts operate in such numbers outside Brick Lane's Bangladeshi restaurants. As one restaurateur explained:

There are a lot of tourists in the area. They're not looking so much on the internet where to go to eat – they're looking at whether there are other customers in your restaurant. Brick Lane is a window-shopping business.

Staffing

Not all of the challenges were due to the external context, however. One important finding of the research was the process of generational change within the Bangladeshi community (see also Alexander, 2011). Many of our owners are now approaching retirement but are finding that their children are not interested in remaining in the restaurant trade themselves. Only three out of the 13 respondents included in our survey indicated that their children would be interested in taking over their restaurant or café in the future. One respondent neatly summarized the situation: 'London boys don't want to work in this business – unless it's very profitable.' Another respondent, who was also

a partner in an Indian takeaway in west London, painted a bleak picture of the future of the UK-wide curry sector, including Brick Lane. 'If the industry is collapsing why would anyone want to come into it?'

A key area of concern is with recruiting, training and retaining staff, particularly chefs and kitchen staff. Where, traditionally, restaurant owners have never experienced a problem recruiting staff because of the presence of local sector-specific employment agencies as well as strong informal recruitment networks among the local Bangladeshi community, there are signs that this pattern is changing rapidly. This has been exacerbated by the increasingly strict controls on migration from outside the EU. These have been a source of concern for the industry for many years, particularly in locating high-quality chefs (Leftly, 2016), but the problem is increasing in relation to finding low-paid kitchen staff and waiters. Even those local Bangladeshi men without formal academic qualifications have reservations about working in curry houses because of the long hours and poor pay. Instead, they prefer to seek employment in mainstream retail outlets, such as Sainsbury's, Superdrug or Tesco, or in the gig economy driving taxis for Uber or Ola or delivering food for Deliveroo. The exceptions are recent arrivals to East London, who have relocated from countries like Italy and Spain, or the newly arrived Bangladeshi husbands of British Bangladeshi brides (Alexander, Chatterji and Jalais, 2016). The crisis is particularly acute for kitchen staff, who are most likely to be new arrivals with poor levels of language skills and education. As one respondent commented:

People who work in the kitchen tend to be quite shy by nature. You know, they won't even come out if there's a customer here in the restaurant – they just prefer working behind the scenes. Also, they tend to be people who are the least well-educated, I would say, and who don't speak much English. And they're people who like labour-intensive jobs.

Another respondent noted:

Yes, we are really, really struggling. I'll tell you one little example. With the new generation only a few people want to work in a restaurant. And even if they do, they only want to work as a waiter – they don't want to go to work in the kitchen. So, if the chef is not in the kitchen, then how are you going to run the business?

The future of Brick Lane

The challenges facing the 'Indian' restaurant trade in Brick Lane are part of a capital-wide cultural disassembling and reassembling of 'cool' – that is, eclectic and constantly changing consumption practices based around a mainly youthful, cosmopolitan, outward-looking cultural ethos and worldview (Guardian, 2020). They reflect too a move towards the super-diversification of the food retail sector and of the 'ordinary' high streets across Britain's towns and cities, which in turn reflects changing consumption practices and changing consumer 'tastes'. Nevertheless, the fate of Banglatown, and related areas, cannot be simply dismissed as an inevitable result of a changing and notoriously precarious market. Indeed, as we have seen, there are specific policy decisions around regeneration and its underlying vision which have worked to marginalize these businesses and the people who have dedicated their lives to them. It is clear that the southern end of Brick Lane has been severely impacted by recent infrastructural developments, and by regeneration funds which have been funnelled to the northern end of the Lane and the Shoreditch area. This neglect has been compounded by the absence of any significant input from economic development agencies or the local authority to help Brick Lane's ethnic minority restaurateurs and café owners with relevant marketing and promotion to enable them to adapt to this new climate. Furthermore, licensing restrictions on opening times of existing and new businesses in Brick Lane and the Truman Brewery have also inhibited the growth of the night-time economy on which many of the curry houses have come to depend.

Clearly, some of the current challenges can be traced to the failure of some of the Banglatown businesses themselves to adapt to the changing market – for example, by creating additional value through 'intangibles' such as innovative menus, architectural and design features, and compelling marketing stories. Nevertheless, the spiralling costs of doing business – rents, business rates, supplies and labour constraints – add additional pressures which do not lie within the owners' control.

It is clear that already the cachet attached to Banglatown, both for the Bangladeshi community and as a marketing strategy, has diminished in recent years. New outlets are opening away from Brick Lane and are popular with increasingly affluent South

Asian/Muslim consumers, particularly to the west of the borough along Whitechapel and Mile End Road. Some established Banglatown businesses, like Sonar Gaon restaurant in Osborn Street and the Ambala sweet shop in Brick Lane, were quick to pick up market signals and relocate to Whitechapel Road in order to sustain (and grow) their businesses.

On the other hand, the imminent arrival of Crossrail in Whitechapel offers a lifeline to Brick Lane's Bangladeshi restaurants, cafés and other retail spaces. The big question is: will they be able to take it?

Of course, one key factor in the future of Bengal Brick Lane/Banglatown – and why it matters – is its significant place in the history and heritage of London's East End, of Bangladeshi Britain and of Britain itself. Banglatown, and its restaurants and cafés, are a symbolic presence marking the longer history of arrival, struggle and belonging of this small, but culturally iconic, community within Britain and its national culture. This history is part of the fabric of Brick Lane and its people. There is no doubt that Brick Lane retains its iconic status for many British Bangladeshis, especially those with roots in Tower Hamlets. As one Bangladeshi respondent neatly put it:

As far as the Bengali community is concerned, it's still the case that if people from Tower Hamlets go outside London, they don't say they're from Bethnal Green, they don't say they're from Shadwell, they don't say they're from Poplar or Whitechapel. They say, 'I'm from Brick Lane, I'm from Brick Lane'. So, that's it – Brick Lane!

However, the survival of Bengali Brick Lane/Banglatown is of wider significance too. As a previously quoted respondent involved in the social housing sector told us:

I think if Brick Lane did lose its identity, I just think it would be boring. I mean, why would I want to walk through something that feels like Camden High Street? It would be the same thing, and I don't know whether that's the future we all want to live in. I know I wouldn't. I quite like going to areas where a particular community feels, you know, confident. I think it's the sign of a good city.

A note on timing

The fieldwork for our 'Beyond Banglatown' project ended in February 2020, shortly before the coronavirus crisis hit London and the current, continuing lockdown. At the time of writing, we are not able to ascertain the impact of the crisis on the businesses in Brick Lane, though it is likely to be severe, if not devastating, exacerbating existing challenges and posing new ones. Informal sources tell us that only one of the Banglatown restaurants

has remained open, for takeaway business. In early May 2020, one restaurateur told us bluntly: 'Brick Lane has become a ghost town – the City people, everyone, have all disappeared'.

The future of Brick Lane, and of Bengali Brick Lane, seems even more uncertain; but our original task of recording the fascinating history of Banglatown and its people at such a moment, and supporting its future, becomes even more urgent.

Policy recommendations

History and heritage

1. There should be a broadening of heritage support beyond the current focus on the Victorian heritage of Brick Lane, recognizing the area's key historical role around migration and Empire in the shaping of global London.
2. The unique contribution of the Bangladeshi community to the history of Brick Lane and East London should be formally recognized in local heritage institutions and educational provision, as well as in the material fabric of the street.

Options include:

- Safeguarding the future of the Boishakhi Mela, and ensuring the involvement of broad sections of the Bangladeshi community;
- Reinstating and expanding the Brick Lane Curry Festival, to include pop-up food stalls, street food, music and art;
- Maintaining the presence of Banglatown markers (the gate, street lamps etc.);
- Developing a programme of local history/ geography studies for every local primary and secondary school in the borough, to ensure coverage of the long Bangladeshi (and wider migrant) history and anti-racist struggle of the Brick Lane area.

Development and investment

3. There needs to be a clear recognition by the City and borough planners of the hidden social and economic 'costs' of new regeneration/ global investment in East London. This involves securing both affordable social housing for low-paid workers and also affordable workspaces; in particular, recognising the punitive nature of spiralling property rates and rental costs for small-scale street businesses.

4. The role of high streets, and underpinning infrastructure (transport, parking, street maintenance) should be recognized as key to the identity of local communities and economies, supporting employment and social and cultural connection.
5. The significance of self-employment and precarious and gig economy work in these highly volatile sectors should be recognized, and support and training offered to workers in these sectors

Banglatown restaurants

6. The unique cultural and social heritage offered by Brick Lane's 'Indian' restaurants, and its significance in the tourist economy, should be recognized and the continued survival of the sector ensured by renewed investment and training in the businesses in Banglatown, as an explicit programme within the ongoing *London Plan*.
7. Borough planning support for the restaurant sector should be developed, e.g. through ground-floor property usage restrictions, capping of rents for these establishments, extension of licensing hours and more investment in the surrounding night-time economy.
8. Restaurant owners should be given training and support to allow them to adapt to a changing business environment, e.g. through the development of regional 'branding' and menus, smart markets and local food provisions, and further engagement with online delivery provisions and social media marketing.
9. In the wake of the Covid-19 crisis, these businesses are likely to be severely impacted and will need significant financial support to ensure their survival.

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Appendix: Sources for Figure 1

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*Survey from Google Earth (1999–2019)

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