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“My Away is Here”: Place, Emplacement and Mobility amongst British Bengali Children

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When we were in Bangladesh we were really rich and we could get anything we want ... You know rich kids, they live in really big mansions? That was what we lived in
Maisha (Interview, 3/09/08)

In this paper we discuss the conceptualisation of children's places and emplacement with reference to the experiences of British Bengali children who live in East London yet travel to Bangladesh as members of transnational families. In particular we consider how recent approaches to 'emplacement' as a political and economic process might be informed by examination of children's practices of mobility. In our research, this mobility involves journeys across space from Britain to Bangladesh as well as across time, as the children grow older and move up (and down) social hierarchies which are realigned according to geography. As we shall see, the children's accounts of Britain and Bangladesh also point to the physicality of places, which are often narrated via tales of bodily experience. Whilst our material indicates how, as many others have pointed out, places are socially constructed and filled with meaning by an array of social practices (cf. Ardener, 1993; Bender, 1993; Lovell, 1998; Massey, 2005; Low and LawrenceZunigais, 2003), it thus also shows how for children places are experienced physically, embedded as they are in particular physical as well as political ecologies.

The research on which these perspectives are based took place in East London over 2007 and 2008 in a project which aimed to investigate the experiences and representations of transnationalism amongst a group of largely British Bangladeshi children in Year Five (aged 9-10)¹. Using participatory arts methods as well as the more conventional methods of participant observation and interviewing (see Zeitlyn and Mand, this volume), the project was based in two schools in Bethnal Green where the pupils are largely of Bangladeshi heritage. The arts methodologies included art workshops in which the children created work around the themes of 'Home' and 'Away' for an exhibition at the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green². They also kept diaries, wrote stories and took photographs. As this and their interviews indicate, it is not that their lives are disembedded from place (or, indeed, that they are in any way 'displaced') but more that place and location are arranged in a particular constellation in which 'home' and 'away' are simultaneously the same place.

Let us start with the context of our research: the historically deep rooted relationship between East London and Sylhet, in North East Bangladesh.

British Bengali Transnationalism: The Story of a Relationship

Tower Hamlets has long been connected to Sylhet District through chains of migration which started with the arrival in the early Twentieth century of sailors from East India who 'jumped ship' and found work in the area around East London's docks.

¹ The research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of its Diasporas, Migration and Identities Programme.

² The exhibition ran from January – March 2009.

These ‘lascars’ were the pioneers for today’s community, paving the way for their male relatives and neighbours who came in their thousands in the 1950s and 60s, taking up the opportunity of employment in factories and industrial plants in cities across the U.K. (Chowdhury, 1993; Adams, 1987; Gardner 2002). Over the 1970s-80s most of the original migrants brought their Sylhet based wives and children from Bangladesh to settle permanently in Britain. At the same time the decline of Britain’s industrial sector caused many to move to London, where the rapidly growing Bangladeshi community offered employment opportunities³, mosques, shops selling Bangladeshi goods and the security and sense of community that comes by being surrounded by one’s fellow countrymen (Dench, Gavron and Young, 2007). Today, the Bengalis comprises 33% of the population of Tower Hamlets (according to the 2001 census). Once aggregated by age, this figure jumps sharply to 58% of children under the age of 17; in the ‘core’ areas of settlement, to the South West of the borough, the percentage of Bengalis rises to 45% amongst the whole population, and 74% of children under 17 (Dench, Gavron and Young, 2006:57).

Within the context of Bangladesh those families who settled in the U.K have been highly successful, buying up large amounts of land and building themselves grand houses. In Britain however, the story has been more mixed: in comparison with other groups originating from South Asia British Bangladeshis routinely come near the bottom in tables of poverty, social deprivation and so on⁴. This is exemplified by the Bangladeshi population within Tower Hamlets, which itself has the dubious honour of being ranked as the most deprived borough in England⁵. Within the borough unemployment rates in 2005-6 were at 12.8% for men and 12.5% for women, over double the rate for England and Wales as a whole; amongst Bangladeshis, the rate for people under 25 was over 40%⁶.

Another key feature of the British Bangladeshi community is the vibrancy of the links which are maintained with Bangladesh. In many ways it is a ‘transnational community’ *par excellence*, in which continued exchanges of goods, ideas and people link places together within and across geographical space⁷. Indeed, whilst having made lives in Britain many people continue to regard Bangladesh as central to their identity; a key location in lives where ‘home’ is situated in several places at once. An important practice in the maintenance of these connections are the regular trips that British Bangladeshis make to Sylhet in order to see their relatives, manage their ‘*deshi*’ (homeland) affairs and have a break from life in the U.K. Some parents talk explicitly about such visits as a way of reinforcing family bonds for their children and exposing them to ‘Bangladeshi’ ways of doing things. As we shall see, the visits are experienced in various ways by the children.

How do transnational children⁸ make sense of the different places they encounter? How does their relationship with these places affect their identities and what might we learn from them about the nature of transnationalism? These were the broad questions which framed our research. In attempting to answer them (a project too large to be

³ Like many other migrant communities, British Bengalis originally occupied economic niches, in their case, the rag trade or ‘Indian’ restaurants, which in Britain are staffed wholly by Sylhetis.

⁴ A 2007 Report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on income poverty and ethnic groups in the U.K found that Bangladeshis have the highest income poverty, at 65%, compared to 55% of Pakistanis, 25% of Indians and 20% of white British (<http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/2057.pdf>) accessed 17/03/10

⁵ This is calculated through the Indices of English Deprivation, 2004 (<http://www.hounslowpct.nhs.uk/cgi-bin/documents/Chapter%201.pdf>)

⁶ Tower Hamlets Public Health Report (<http://www.publichealth.thpct.nhs.uk/PublicHealthReport/index.aspx?pid=50>)

⁷ For discussion of perspectives on transnational migration, see Vertovec, 2009

⁸ By our use of this term we are referring to children who are part of transnational families, rather than children who are necessarily constantly moving over geographical space.

encompassed in this paper) we began to realise that we should start with the analysis of *place* and *emplacement*. Let us turn to these broader theoretical perspectives.

Place, Emplacement and Location in the Study of Children

Places can be analysed both as physical locations (East London or Sylhet in our case) or as social positions, whether in families, classrooms or wider society. Attention to children's 'places' is thus necessarily multi-faceted. For transnational British Bangladeshi children in London as well as Bangladesh, their positioning in their families is invariably important: older siblings are known by special terms (*bhai-sahab* for older brothers, and *abfa* for older sisters) and tend to have more authority over their younger brothers and sisters than one might expect to find in an ethnically white 'English' family. At school, they are rigidly placed in age-sets (Class Four, Class Five and so on), each with its specific educational agenda and expectations; within these age-sets they are often further sorted into ability groups, often with their own tables (a physical place) and names (e.g 'oak', 'chestnut' etc, to hide the rankings).

In these examples the children have little official control over their placement. All however participate in different forms and levels of compliance, resistance or subversion. Within the family domain, for example, whilst officially they may be placed in relatively rigid inter-generational or age hierarchies with their parents, grandparents and siblings, they may accept or subvert these, according to context: an older brother might tell his little sister what to do; whether or not she does it is another matter. When they physically move into different locations (school, the mosque, where all attend after school Arabic lessons, or when they're 'playing out') they are placed in different relationships, vis-à-vis each other and wider society.

Such processes of 'emplacement' depend not only on how childhood is constructed in each context but also upon gender, ethnic identity, social class and so on. As they grow older, for example, the spaces children inhabit and positions they occupy are likely to be increasingly influenced by gender. For our Class Five children, these distinctions are yet to become important at school. At home, however, the children's diaries reveal that gender plays a significant role in the places they occupy. Whilst boys are more likely to play outside (although like many families in London, parents often restrict children's movement outside the home due to fear of cars, crime and other hazards) the diaries kept by the girls show how their lives at home tend to be taken up with domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and helping look after younger siblings. Fatima, for example, told Kanwal that:

I do a lot of cooking. I wash all the cups and stuff and I cut the onions and I make rice and I do most stuff like I have to give stuff to her (mum) when she tells me to

Kanwal: How do you feel about that?

Fatima: It's nice but sometimes really boring because when I don't want to do ... like, she always calls me and I always say "NO!" but she shouts at me: "Go on, do it!"

Ethnically, the children are placed by wider society through various markers, all variable according to context, but mostly relying upon skin colour and / or clothing. For girls, their scarves, or *hijab* (which many wear) mark them out not only as female but within wider British society as Muslim. In the current climate in which anti-Muslim sentiment has tended to solidify around debates surrounding veiling, such markers are

highly political⁹, even if the girls are, so far, largely unaware of it. Within their schools and immediate neighbourhood, processes of racialisation are largely submerged, for they are very much in the majority; being labelled 'Bangladeshi', 'Asian' or 'Muslim' only becomes important when difference is revealed by moving out of familiar territory into 'white' areas of London or U.K. Indeed, within Tower Hamlets place and emplacement work together to produce racialised spacial divides in which particular parts of the borough have a very high percentage of Bengali residents, whilst others (seen by many Bengalis as 'no go areas') are more predominantly white (Dench, Gavron and Young, 2006: 57).

Whilst processes of religious, ethnic or national emplacement are likely to become more explicit as the children grow older and are increasingly forced to 'choose' between particular signifiers, in answering questions concerning their identity, they often refuse to be tied down, as in the following exchange:

*K: When, when people are...if people are to ask you what are you?
What would you say you are?*

Mad Max¹⁰: Uh...I am a...human being...

K: Mhm.

Mad Max: ...I'm a boy...

K: Mhm.

Mad Max: ...and stuff.

K: Mhm. And if they said you're a human being, you're a boy, you're a student, you're somebody's son, are you British? Are you Bangladeshi? Are you both? What are you?

Mad Max: Um...both.

(Interview with 'Mad Max' 2/ 11/07)

Emplacement, Locality and Global Inequality

Emplacement results from global processes as well as those experienced within families and communities; indeed, neither the local nor the global can be 'de-linked' from the other. One way this might be analysed is through renewed focus on processes of social reproduction, a project reinvigorated by Cindy Katz's recent work on 'vagabond capitalism' (Katz, 2001; 2004). In this, Katz argues that within late capitalism the reproductive costs of society are increasingly borne in a different place from where the benefits accrue. This means that within the shifting vagaries of 'vagabond capitalism' (in which production is mobile, but social reproduction largely place bound) certain groups of children bear the toll of environmental costs, leading to a 're-scaling' of childhood (ibid: 715). By use of the metaphor of 'topographies', Katz suggests that the links between multiply situated actors in a range of diverse geographical locations and the diverse forces of globalisation can be made; just as topographies in physical geography include detailed descriptions of the totality of features in a given locality, with attention to elevation, distance etc, 'critical topographies' assume that space carries and reinforces uneven social relations (2001: 720-721). In both Sudan and deprived neighbourhoods of New York, for example, global capitalism has led to particular economic and

⁹ See for example <http://www.inminds.co.uk/hijab-ban-an-attack-on-our-daughters.html>; and Jack Straw's 2006 newspaper article, 'I felt uneasy talking to someone I couldn't see' (The Guardian, October 6th, 2006); <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/homeaffairs/story/0,,1889231,00.html>

¹⁰ In order to main confidentiality, the children chose interview names for themselves.

environmental consequences which lead to particular groups of children being de-railed and marooned, even if the world is seemingly ever more interconnected (2004: 156)

Katz's perspective resonates with the history of Bangladeshi settlement in Tower Hamlets. As global migrants, the forefathers of the children involved in our research originally moved from their villages in Sylhet to centres of colonial and post-colonial capital; in the post war period men from Britain's ex-colonies were actively recruited to help re-build the country's infra-structure and work in heavy industry. Yet whilst Katz is correct in stating that during this period indigenous reproductive costs were increasingly paid for by the state, for the country's incoming migrant workers this was not the case. Indeed, as Meillassoux argued twenty years earlier, the great benefit of labour migration to capitalist centres of production was that so long as individual migrants are not able to settle, their reproductive costs are covered in the periphery whilst the profits are accumulated at the centre (Meillassoux, 1981).

Whilst the acquisition of British citizenship and processes of family reunification by the original Bengali settlers in Britain over the period 1960-1990 demonstrates the problems with overly deterministic analyses that stress structure at the expense of historical context and human agency, the collapse of manufacturing industry in Britain and the socio-spatial divide between the places where profits from Katz's 'vagabond capitalism', pile up (for example the financial heartland of London, to the west of Tower Hamlets) and the places where its costs are felt (ie inner city boroughs such as Tower Hamlets, where unemployment, over-crowding in poor quality council housing, ill health and social deprivation amongst the families who once supplied labour are routine) suggest that the topographic approach that Katz proposes might be valuable to our own project. As she reminds us: 'The settings in which children grow up speak volumes about their value as present and future members of particular societies' (Katz, 2001: 715).

It is not difficult to characterise the settings of working class children's lives in Tower Hamlets in terms of the environmental, physical and social costs they involve. A recent report, for example, puts the borough at the top of a league of unhealthy places to live in the U.K.¹¹. Pollution, busy roads, squalid tenement blocks, the lack of open or green spaces to play in and high levels of overcrowding in council flats all feature in the lives of the children involved in our research, a stark contrast to the types of homes they dream of. Whilst drawing a picture of her ideal house, Najma¹² (age 10) told us: 'I would like to be a lawyer or an actress and like to live in a mansion in the country side. I wouldn't like to live near Bancroft (the name of the housing estate where she lives)'. Drawing an arrow pointing to the tower block, she wrote the caption 'Everyone is so close!' In another piece of art, Najma's classmate illustrated her journey from the council estate where she lives to school, pointing out the smelly bins that she walks past ("pooney!") and the heavy traffic on the roads she crosses.

Many of the children we interviewed complained about the urban environment in which they are growing up, sometimes using their imaginings of Bangladesh to critique London; as we shall see further in the paper, this use of often idealised places as 'good to think with', was common to many interviews. In the following excerpt, for example, Farzana compares the physical environment of Bangladesh favourably to London:

Farzana: It (London) isn't as good as Bangladesh ... it's really crazy that people (in Bangladesh) think that it's really nice, because you know in Bangladesh everything is open space, you can run wherever

¹¹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/health/article3129375.ece>

¹² All names are pseudonyms

you want. There is a bigger park then you could ever think of ...it's an adventure park, you know, (there's) theme parks and stuff. There is a bigger park than our local park...it is really small .. It's (the one in Bangladesh) is bigger than Victoria Park...and its really nice and open space. Here in London everything's like all together you know how in Bangladesh like, our house is here and like 20, 30, 25 meters away, there is the next door neighbours. In England its like all everything's together...

Whilst Jess told us that the grey colour of the Thames made her 'want to puke', Mad Max had the following story of the overcrowded streets of Whitechapel:

K: Do you like it in Whitechapel?

Mad Max: Yeah, but it's a bit too crowded.

K: Is it? ...

Mad Max: Horrible.

K: No? What's horrible about it?

Mad Max: It's too crowded...

K: Mhm.

Mad Max: ...and it's really crowded and messy. And sometimes, once I slipped there...

K: Mhm.

Mad Max: ...and I hurt my head.

K: Mhm. Oh, God. What in the market there?

Mad Max: Um, no. On the road.

K: Really?

Mad Max: Yeah. I saw em something like a squashed banana as well, stepped on it and slipped.

Many children spoke of their neighbourhood in terms of violence and crime. Fatima, for example, made the following comments:

.. the girls throw litter at our house ... we never complain ... once we did, but the council didn't do anything and ... they throw beer cans and stuff like that

Rose told us that she's often frightened by the people who hang around her housing estate:

I'm really scared of my building cos there are kind of drugs people there ... that's why I'm scared ... You know (so and so's brother)? He has lots of gangs and sits down on the stair ... that's why it's really scary and they shout "Whoa, whoa" like that, and then I get scared ... On the second floor I saw this gang smoking stuff and sometimes they spit at people so sometimes the police chase them so sometimes it's kind of scary ...

Fear of the characters encountered in tower block stairwells was mentioned by several children in their interviews, including Jake:

Jake: When we get ready to go in the lift, sometimes we see some white people and a few girls or some dark people ... we see them hanging around there ...they are like teenagers or something (told with apprehension) and my mum says: "How are we going to get past them?" and my dad says "It's alright," and I just walk past them ...

Global Emplacement Reconsidered

Whilst Katz's analysis provides important perspectives on how late capitalism structures the relationship of children to place we should beware of focussing only on the physical or public environment for, as our research shows, places are also experienced by children in terms of the social relationships and social practices that take place within them. This comes across strongly in our interviews; besides describing their physical experience of London and Sylhet the children tend to talk about places in terms of the relationships to people who live in them. Place is thus social in several senses: not are our informants socially *placed* within national, global and familial hierarchies, but they also experience places in terms of social relationships.

Despite the overcrowding and pollution of life in Tower Hamlets most of the children talked first and foremost about their immediate neighbourhood in terms of the family members who lived close to them:

Anita: I live in a building erm and I am in number three and ... erm ... on the first floor and my cousin (uncle's dad's brother and his children) just lives in number one. ...we call him like 'Abu' that means like Dad like we call him in a sweet way, Daddy instead of Uncle.

K: So he's like another dad to you?

Anita: Yes

K: So with you Abu is very close by, how often do you see him?

Anita: Yes and like every two minutes.

Similar comments might be made by many British children: places are turned into homes when one's loved ones are near. But what makes our informants different from the majority of British kids is that for them 'home' is often situated in two places, because close family members live in both London and Bangladesh. This was reflected in our arts activities. For example, when we asked the children to draw 'circles of relatedness' (in which they drew themselves in the middle of the picture, surrounded by concentric circles in which the people who were important to their lives were placed in terms of their relative emotional closeness) many placed Bangladeshi based relatives as close to themselves at the centre as those relatives who live in London. Similar attitudes are reflected in many of the interviews, especially when the children were asked about where 'home' was¹³. As Max put it:

... I've got two homes.

K: You've got two homes? And what makes the home in Bangladesh homely for you?

¹³ For wider discussion of the social construction of 'home' and migration see Rapport and Dawson, 1998; Lovell, 1998; Fog-Olwig, 1997

Mad Max: Um my dad's family. Mmm...my mum's family went there as well. ...And um...just moved from there...And I like it there.

K: Mhm. And here?

Mad Max: And here? The same.

K: It's the same. So is it the people that make a home, a home?

Mad Max: Yeah. My whole family.

Centrally too, rather than simply being located in one location the children move *between* places. By moving across geographical space they are thus *emplaced* in different political ecologies and social hierarchies, their physical mobility adding an extra complexity to Katz's notion of critical topography. All of the children in our research have made at least one trip to Bangladesh; some have gone many times, sometimes staying for months or even years¹⁴. Here, they find themselves in dramatically different physical locations, exchanging crowded council flats in chilly inner city London for what are often grand houses surrounded by rice fields and mango trees, with ponds to bathe in and a climate famed for its extreme humidity. As Anita told Kanwal:

It's like a big open house. You know like in England there are lots of close houses, they are like close houses but (there) there are all these opened areas where you can walk and there's not many cars there and its blue and blue gates and long passage way and its got like 24 rooms

As the presence of these grand houses implies, on their trips to Bangladesh the children often find that their place in local economic and social hierarchies has changed dramatically, for in Sylhet returning Londonis have large amounts of status. Indeed, in contrast to villagers who never migrated Londonis have been remarkably successful, transforming their family fortunes over a generation or so through using their British wages to buy up large amounts of land, and building large, status enhancing houses (Gardner, 1995; 2008). On trips to Bangladesh, 'Londoni' families may feel like celebrities, (or as one mother explained, 'royalty') with crowds of relatives coming to visit, gifts and other forms of largess to distribute, and the cultural capital of the cosmopolitan lifestyles that Bangladeshi based neighbours and relatives aspire to. This disjunction in social status was mentioned by many children in their accounts of visits to Bangladesh, who told us how poor and thin many people were in comparison to them. Anita, for example, described her relatively high social status in Bangladesh in terms of her family's popularity and celebrity status as 'returning' Londonis :

... Yes, all the people would come and they would chat and they would eat and snacks and all that stuff and we would play in the sand and they would call us and we would have rice. ...lots of people come and we just play and sleep late. ...

K: Are you sometimes like a celebrity when you go there?

A: Yes, because everybody's just so popular, yes and everybody is always coming for parties and weddings. We all feel so popular.

As Maisha put it :

¹⁴ A 1997 report states that 27% of Bangladeshi children had taken extended leave during term time in the previous two years (Denton, Gavron and Young, 2006: 140)

When we were in Bangladesh we were really rich and we could get anything we want ... You know rich kids, they live in really big mansions? That was what we lived in
Maisha (Interview, 3/09/08)

As members of diasporic communities and families the children are therefore not emplaced in any one location. As they move between places, their relationship to the global order shifts, for the costs and gains of 'vagabond capitalism' are experienced differently in different locations. In part this is to do with the vastly unequal buying power of the pound versus the taka but it is also intimately tied to the history of colonialism and labour migration from Sylhet, where status has become linked to one's access to foreign places and foreign job opportunities (Gardner, 1995; 2008) and upwards mobility is perceived as only possible abroad. As 'Londonis' with British citizenship, the children and their families are generally at the top of local economic and social hierarchies, a reversal of their hierarchical position whilst in the U.K.

*

Clearly, movement as well as place is crucial to the analysis of emplacement. This movement does not simply involve traversing across space, for as the children walk to school, travel to their cousins' houses in other parts of London or the U.K. and take planes to Sylhet, they also move socially and culturally, their journeys resulting in new social roles and statuses as well as physical and emotional experiences. We have already seen how moving from Britain to Bangladesh involves an increase in social status; it may also mean that in each place local constructions of gender or childhood emplace the children differently. Girls, for example, may find that the relative physical restrictions placed on them alters: sometimes they have more physical freedom in Bangladesh, whilst in other cases it decreases¹⁵.

Movement to Bangladesh may also involve the children re-evaluating their identities and sense of belonging: emplaced as outsider 'Londonis' (ie people who have settled in the U.K) by locals, with an inadequate grasp of Bengali and strange ways of behaving, their visits to Bangladesh sometimes have the effect of reinforcing their British (or London) identities. Interestingly, these reflexive moments often occur after an unpleasant physical experiences, for whilst abstract notions of 'home' are discussed by the children in terms of social relationships, as we shall see in the next section, places are remembered and represented as intensely physical.

Movement and the Physicality of Place

For many of the children, places are discussed first and foremost in terms of bodily experience. Bangladesh, for example, was generally described as an out-of-doors place, where they could run around, see animals and play. Released from school, Arabic classes and domestic chores, children on trips to rural Sylhet tend to relish the physical freedoms they are suddenly allowed, as the following excerpts show:

Kanwal: Why would you like to go back? (to Bangladesh)

¹⁵ Zeitlyn describes how a ten year old girl he knew in the U.K became distinctly chilly towards him on a visit to Bangladesh, and was not allowed to play outside, as a result of an increased sense of *pardah* (the veil) in Bangladesh (this volume)

Rider Big Smoke : Cos it's an open area and you can get out and there's a kind of place like a park near the house and you get to run about and you can see lots of animals

Fatima: .. there's rivers and stuff there ... you know, you have your own, like, your own swimming pool? But there's fishes and stuff inside there and you could swim in there and have a bath¹⁶

For some children, village ponds (often described as 'swimming pools'), rivers, fields and wide open spaces were eulogised as fun to play in, whilst others dwelled more on their negative experiences of rural Bangladesh. Insect bites, boils and the hot, humid weather were constantly mentioned, perhaps because many of the children visit Bangladesh during the summer holidays, a season which is extremely hot and wet in Sylhet. The ponds, in which people wash in Sylheti villages, also featured negatively in some children's accounts, along with frightening wild animals, mosquitoes and other creepy crawlies:

Mad Max: I had flea bites on my legs. We used to sleep in nets that had holes in them and some cockroaches would come in from the hole in the net. People (from Bangladesh) are not scared of nothing really, there are snakes in there ...in Bangladesh there is a ghat...my Dad's sister went all the way in the lake.

The children's bodily experiences in Bangladesh may become markers of wider difference, causing them to consider where they most belong. Mad Max continues:

It's just that you don't get stuff from London that you get in there (in Bangladesh) like mosquitoes bites and leeches that pull your skin off and.. Allergy ...cockroaches. It's just weird, you don't feel like you are from there you just want to go back to your country...

Akon put it like this:

Cos it's like you don't get stuff in London that you get there, like mosquito bites ... I had some big ones and they came at the night and pulled my skin off and then my whole feet were red because then I had some kinds of allergy to them and then ... the cockroaches they come from nowhere and when you are sleeping and they come on top of the net and they sometimes drop on you and it's like just weird ... you don't feel like you're from there and you just want to go back to your country. But I like it cos I know families from there (Akon, undated)

Jess told us about the wild dogs that live in her father's village, which she is afraid of, and how she didn't like to swim in the pond : 'Because there are some little frogs that bite you and your heart stops.'

For other children, it was food – usually its unappetising qualities – that was highlighted by the children as a marker of their difference:

¹⁶ Fatima is referring to the ponds that most family compounds have in rural Bangladesh.

Tamanan: The food in Bangladesh wasn't nice. I miss spaghetti because I like it at school. And, I don't know, milkshake ... if you took the milkshake in Bangladesh, the milk is different and I didn't eat any of the milkshake. My uncle, he made a whole glass and he made it all sloppy and stuff and really disgusting! He put all the milk in, and then put in a tiny bit of water and then he put a little bit of milkshake. They eated it, and my mum said: "What are you doing? You don't know how to do it, because you're in Bangladesh."

Bangladesh as a Tourist Site

One striking aspect of the children's narratives of Sylhet is that in contrast to the rural idyll described by elders in Gardner's previous research, with its *misti batash* (sweet breezes) and *shonar jomeen* (golden fields)¹⁷, a very different place emerges. Jostling with complaints about biting insects, snakes and wild animals, or accounts of the family members who live in the *desh* are other comments, which construct Bangladesh as a tourist site. Just like the elder's descriptions, the children's accounts should be analysed as cultural constructions rather than as wholly objective. In their narrations of sites within Bangladesh, the children speak from particular positions (or places): as urban British kids, certainly, but also as children who, emplaced as their families are within the global economic order, are not accustomed to regular holidays, material treats or day trips.

As Farzana told us:

... so like if you went to Sylhet or Dhaka the sites are really amazing ,so natural like, and you know the beach? It's really big. ...there are businesses and really nice shopping centres...Actually its really nice and the thing I like about Bangladesh is that it is a really nice place to explore

When the children were asked what they liked best about Bangladesh, two locations were constantly referred to: shopping malls, and 'Dreamland'. The presence of both indicates a new, modern Bangladesh, a place where things and experiences are to be consumed. Let us start with the malls.

The growth of ever more sophisticated and prestigious shopping malls in parts of South Asia where there are high levels of migration to the West has been noted by several commentators (Gardner and Ahmed, 2009). Selling South and South East Asian saris, scarves and jewellery, plus the usual global brands, the malls consciously market a cosmopolitan, 'urban' life style, featuring shops with names such as the deliberately misspelled TESSCO, or London Fried Chicken. That they are frequently empty of customers, catering almost entirely for Londonis on trips to the *desh* is not the point; what matters is that shopping at a 'mall' (or owning one) is, for locals, a key signifier of migrant success. For Londonis who may not so much be returning, as visiting a country they have never lived in, the 'Mall' may be a reassuring sign of modernity in a country famed for high levels of poverty, corruption and environmental catastrophe. That the children talk about visits to shopping malls thus reflects the cultural milieu of Sylhet in particular and South Asia more generally, where rapid economic change and the enrichment of a new entrepreneurial elite is reflected in spiralling property prices and

¹⁷ Gardner, 2002

consumer consumption. It also reflects their identity as urban British kids, for whom the acquisition of particular goods (mobile phones, Play Stations, Nintendos, etc) is a highly desired signifier of 'coolness' and hence status amongst one's peers. This is what Mad Max told us of Al Hamera, the most famous mall in Sylhet Town:

I like the shopping centre called Al Hamda, there is so much stuff there like play station 2, Nintendo 2 games, stuffed toys, clothes, and everything erm... like diamonds ...and at the top there's a big fancy restaurant.'

It should be noted that few if any of the children in our research have their own play stations, computers or Nintendo games; whilst they may see them on T.V and discuss them with their friends their families cannot usually afford such lavish presents. Similarly, in London few, if any, regularly visit large shopping malls such as Brent Cross, or travel to the shops in central London. Instead, their experience of shopping tends to be limited to the shops in their immediate locality: the Roman Road, Bethnal Green Road and Whitechapel (a highlight is a local shop called Nansen's). All of these are within the 'core' area of Bangladeshi settlement in Tower Hamlets; few Bangladeshi families regularly venture further afield partly due to their fear of racism. Mad Max's excitement at Al Hamera is thus partly structured by his life in Tower Hamlets, whereby economics and racism confines him to a relatively limited locality.

The second location that the children frequently describe is 'Dreamland', a fun fair on the outskirts of Sylhet Town, built primarily for visiting Londoni families. The children's visits to this site identify them within the Syheti context as part of wealthy Londoni or urban families. Taking children to amusement parks or for child focussed outings is, it should be noted, a middle class activity in Bangladesh, carried out by only the most highly educated or wealthy Bangladeshis; in the villages children do not expect to be entertained by adults. Similarly in London, the children in our research are not regularly taken out to expensive play parks. Once again their accounts have to be interpreted in terms of their lives in the U.K. as well as their experiences in Bangladesh. Whilst 'consuming' the attractions of Sylhet as tourists, the children's narrations of Dreamland thus result from their global emplacement, as children from low income families situated in a deprived part of London.

Movement, Belonging and Dosh-Bidosh

As children move over space they are also moving across and between cultural and social spheres. Whilst we do not consider that they are 'caught between two cultures' (Watson, 1977) a phrase that despite its critique by a large number of commentators is constantly repeated in the media as well as government reports on 'social cohesion', there are significant differences in cultural practices and ideologies within the different locations that the children move between. Within London alone, these may involve cultural differences within and between home, school and community¹⁸. When they travel between London and Bangladesh, they may (or may not) be experiencing even more radical disjunctures. For example, some children commented upon the strictness of Bangladeshi adults in Sylhet, concluding that they were better off living in the U.K. In particular, schools in Bangladesh were compared unfavourably to those in London. Other children found themselves treated better in Bangladesh than in

¹⁸ See Zeitlyn 2010

London. In the following quotes, Anita and Mad Max are also obliquely commenting upon their lives in the U.K via their reflections on Bangladesh as a more friendly and relaxed place, where adults are kinder and have more time. As we have already seen, places are 'good to think with', producing critiques of the children's everyday lives in London:

Mad Max: I like my dad's sister because she was very kind to me (in Bangladesh) and when I used to say that I want chips she would make it for me, chips. They always used to be very kind to me... They have more time and (because) they don't see you for a long time... because in London they always see me and they can't take me places because they have to work.

Anita: There, no one will say anything bad about you, they won't say that you are so short or ugly, they always say something nice about you, even if you meet people they will always say something nice about you. If you got to the shops if there is something really expensive they will make a low price for you... They will always be kind to you and ask you would you like a drink and they would get it there.

This discursive use of one place to reflect upon another does not mean that the children necessarily made a clear distinction about where they belong or where 'home' is located. Indeed, although physically very different, both rural Sylhet and Bethnal Green emerge in many of their interviews as part of the same social field, their family being located at different points across geographical space. When asked, some children did indeed express a preference for either Bangladesh or Britain, but a great many insisted that they could not choose between the two. In response to the question of whether she would like to live in Britain or Bangladesh, for example, Maisha said she wanted to live in both places, whilst Rose commented that: "I love London now and Bangladesh."

Significantly too, the interviews with the children reveal that the categories of 'home' and 'away', (which framed our original research proposal) are largely false, for almost all conflate the Bengali terms 'desh' (home) and 'bidesh' (abroad). Amongst Bangladeshi elders in London, as well as villages in Sylhet, 'desh' is unequivocally translated as 'the homeland' (Sylhet) and 'bidesh' as foreign countries (Gardner, 2002; 1993). Yet rather than distinguishing between 'home' and 'away', as their forefathers would, we found that the children merge the terms. This is partly a result of their incomplete knowledge of Bengali, for many were not sufficiently confident that they could translate the terms *desh* / *bidesh*. But it also reflects the increasing falseness of the dichotomy of *desh* / *bidesh*, and by extension, the separation of places within transnational social fields. As several children told us, *desh* is Bangladesh, whilst 'home' (using the English word) is London:

K: Where is your Desh?

Max: I'd say Bangladesh

K: What, your bidesh?

Max: My home is England... that's my Bidesh

K: So, your desh is Bangladesh?

Max: Yeah

K: What does desh mean? Is it home?

Max: Yeah

K: And what does bidesh mean?

Max: Bidesh means home and desh means away

K: Are you sure, I thought it was the other way around...I may be wrong.

I thought that desh was your home and bidesh was away

Max: I dunno

K: Ok...lets say where is ...home is England?

Max: and away is Bangladesh. I got family in there that I don't really get to see...Once in a blue moon

A similar conflation of the terms was repeated by almost every child we interviewed, leading to some creative phraseology. Tracey, for example, called Bangladesh 'My away home', whilst Ted summarised a long discussion concerning how to define *desh* and *bidesh* with the pithy conclusion that: 'My away is here.'

Conclusion: Emplacement, Time and Movement

Time moves, too. This is particularly pertinent to the study of children who, (from an adult's perspective), grow and change so quickly. As they journey through early life, children's relationships to the movement of time is characterised by a range of emplacements which in turn are affected by culture, gender and place. As time passes, the children involved in our research will move into new phases of their lives and experience places differently. Processes of emplacement and Katz's physical topographies thus need to be understood in terms of individual life courses, as well as wider national or global changes. Indeed, what our research indicates is that whilst Katz's focus on global emplacement and 'critical topographies' is critical in understanding how children experience the workings of 'vagabond capitalism', the relationship between emplacement and mobility also requires close interrogation. As we have seen, one effect of neo-liberal capitalism is that some children move *between* places, rather than being marooned in one, and this can lead to a transformation of status and power, experienced over geographical space.

Combined with this, children's experiences of places change over time. Places which offered little in the way of recreation may (or may not) become more appealing, fearfulness may give way to other emotions as urban spaces offer new forms of exclusion and inclusion for teenagers and adults. As the children change over time, so do the neighbourhoods where they live. This is nowhere more likely than East London, which in 2012 will host the Olympics and is currently receiving large amounts of funding for development, though whether this will be of benefit to local communities is yet to become clear. Bangladesh is changing fast, too. In Sylhet, Londonis from the U.K often comment on how, on arrival, they hardly recognise the places they remembered from their last visit: roads and houses have appeared in spaces which were once fields, areas remembered as rural and peaceful becoming rapidly 'developed'.

The children and their families may also experience social as well as geographical mobility. Many Bengalis have already relocated from the Bethnal Green area to more suburban areas such as Forest Gate, for example. The degree that the children will be socially mobile over their lives and the relationship this has to place (in the widest sense) is an important question which given the limited time frame of our research we can only answer speculatively. Whilst a large body of work points to the positive relationship between migration and social mobility in South Asia (Osella and Osella, 2000; Osella and Gardner, 2004), the emplacement of the children into particular class positions and

racialised categories in the UK, combined with their spatial location in the most socially and economically deprived borough in London, may mean that whilst their families in Sylhet have experienced high levels of social mobility, within Britain they are more constrained. The evidence so far is contradictory. Previous in-migrant groups in Tower Hamlets have tended to be highly successful, trading life inside the borough for the more prosperous suburbs as they have climbed up the social scale. Equally, other British South Asian groups have shown a sharp upwards trajectory, moving into professional jobs and middle class spaces over a course of a generation or two (cf. Ballard, 1994). Whether the Bengali community in Tower Hamlets will have the same success so quickly is more doubtful; Dench, Gavron and Young point to high levels of unemployment, ill-health and dependency upon social welfare as signs that they may become 'stuck', both socially and geographically, as a deprived underclass in inner London, an argument which has strong resonance with the perspectives of Katz (Dench, Gavron and Young, 2007: 229).

Finally, the nature of transnational links between Britain are continually changing and it is to children that we must look to discern what shape these might take in the future. This leads us to our last point: no analysis of children's relationships to places (or indeed their experience of transnational migration) is complete without consideration of how children act upon those places and change them. The relationships which the children in our research forge in the U.K and Bangladesh, and the ways in which they experience and think about different places in the transnational social field will have a strong influence over how links between particular villages in Sylhet and Britain develop over the generations. As we have seen, most (if not all) of the children insist that they have homes in both Britain and Bangladesh, for both, in different ways (and using different words) are their *desh* / home.

This does not mean, however, that transnational relationships will continue as they are today. Many children, for example, discussed Bangladesh more as a tourist site and location of holidays (where there are 'good beaches', 'swimming pools' and 'fun-fairs') than as a place where they may one day live and work. Relationships with relatives in Bangladesh, though currently strongly felt, have to be made and remade over the children's lives via visits and telephone calls. The development of these links over time, and the ecological topographies of different places in the British Bengali transnational field will, as Katz reminds us, depend in part upon the vagaries of global capitalism. Yet as we have tried to argue in this paper, they will also depend upon the children.

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