

ERS Symposium Response

Joya Chatterji(a)¹ and Claire Alexander (b)²

(a) Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

(b) School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Abstract

In this short rejoinder, we respond to some of the main critiques raised by the symposium contributors. We focus on 4 areas: a) the place of theory; b) the issue of scale; c) the role of 'the Muslim' and Islam; and d) the significance of 'mobility capital' to theories of diaspora and migration

Keywords:

Bengal, Diaspora, Migration, Mobility Capital, Muslims

The Bengal Diaspora project was always an impossible one. The venture spanned continents, centuries and disciplines. The book that emerged was ten years in the making, written by authors of very different (and rather strong) opinions and temperaments. Along the way, we had vigorous debates about things that could or should be or not be done, achieved or said. The manuscript ran 20,000 words over length, and in the end, much we deemed important had to be left unsaid. That there is a book at all is something of a miracle. The volume – with its many flaws - is nevertheless a testament to our shared commitment to telling the story of this important but little-understood instance of mass migration, and the novel understanding of diaspora that might be gained through it – perhaps the more so as the 70th Anniversary of India's partition looms.

Long after we had completed the book, we had no idea how it would be received or by whom it would be read. Indeed, we wondered whether it would be read by anyone at all. The very generous comments of the six readers in this symposium were hence humbling and sometimes startling. Their insightful and thoughtful responses to the book, and nuanced criticisms of it, far exceeded our hopes. We are deeply grateful to all six readers for the care and attention with which they have read this eccentric work.

The pieces have raised a great many issues that have given us food for thought and ideas for further research and writing. Due to constraints of space, we will address only four main areas: the place of theory; the issue of scale; the role of 'the Muslim' and Islam in the work; and its contribution to diaspora and migration theory.

¹ CONTACT: Joya Chatterji (jc280@cam.ac.uk)

² CONTACT: Claire Alexander (claire.alexander@manchester.ac.uk)

The first is the place of theory. Several reviewers challenged our claim that this is not a book of theory. Their challenge is probably fair. However for us, as historian and sociological ethnographer respectively, foregrounding the stories of the individual and her place in the broad sweep of history was a deliberate choice. So too was our focus on the forgotten, the ignored, the invisible and the weak among the migrants, as well as the immobile – those who are left behind in the age of migration. We strove to recognise them as agents in history, albeit located within coercive structures shaped by the nation state, and adverse social and economic circumstance. For us, therefore, theory arose from, and was refracted through, these deeply situated experiences.

We asked ourselves one central question: if we put the histories of these neglected people back into theory, how would that change our understanding of 'diaspora' and 'migration'? The vignettes that opened up each chapter (which several of the pieces remark upon) were intended to flag up this unifying approach, which transcended the diverse places and experiences we studied, and our different disciplinary starting points. For us there was no tension between textured historical narrative and the in-depth experiences of groups or individuals. Indeed, we have tried to show that the two are inseparable. Our 240 interviews gave us profound insights into where, why and how mobility founders as it rubs up against harsh structures, or against the lack of specific resources or competences. Our approach, *pace* Hall, was 'both-and' rather than 'either/or'. Unifying the 'birds-eye' perspective with the 'worms-eye' view was our distinctive method, and we sought theoretical insights through it.

Our method was to use these stories to prise open categories and ask radical questions about them. The chief categories we interrogated were 'Bengali' 'Muslim' and 'diaspora' – hence the title of the work. We started by assuming nothing – literally nothing (insofar as that is humanly possible) – about these categories as they were then understood. If (as many noted) we succeeded in 'up-ending' or 'destabilising' them, the method has proved useful.

A significant insight we gained from this method was about the need to re-scale the very notion of a diaspora. We realised that small-scale, very local, sometimes invisible, movements (which had occurred nonetheless on a massive scale) had profoundly 'diasporic' qualities. Opening our eyes to the different scales – or what Keith refers to as the 'shifting optics' – at which diaspora occurs allowed us to reconceptualise it in a novel way. The case of marriage was one important instance. While it is certainly the case, as Keith notes, that feminist and post-colonial scholars have discussed the place of women in migration, we would argue they have not seriously engaged with marriage *itself* as a form of diaspora. An innovation of our work is to argue that the migration of a young girl thirty miles (since that was the norm in the Bengal delta in the period we studied) from her natal village to her affinal village upon marriage was *itself a form of diaspora*. The role of spousal migration in shaping international migrations has of course been noted, but in these cases, it not entirely clear whether marriage itself, or 'long-distance migration' that causes the condition of diaspora. Putting these two experiences – virilocal marriage in the delta and spousal migration across oceans

- alongside each other, through real stories, in the same framework (and in the same chapter), helps to tease out exactly what we mean when we say that 'marriage is a form of diaspora'. We argue that marriage, however local, leads to profound and permanent ruptures of social space. It transforms women and renders their return 'home' impossible: since 'home' for them no longer exists in any meaningful way, they experience the sense of exile and longing often associated with diaspora. Scale, and the juxtaposition of scales, thus proved extremely revealing, and has thrown light, often in unexpected ways, on aspects of theory.

One of the categories used in an open-ended way in the book was 'Muslim'. Several of the contributors raised questions about the role of Islam in the formation of the Bengal diaspora, and our understanding of the figure of 'the Muslim', whether in discourse or in nation-state formation. However, in the six reviews, two very different views emerged on how this ought to have been operationalized in the book. Keith argues that 'diaspora has clear religious roots, even if it has been subjected to sociological appropriation', and he felt that this should have been recognised. McLoughlin, likewise, points to the significance of 'Islamic tradition as a more or less enduring part of social structure', and Dhingra refers to religion as a 'cultural institution, like family'. In contrast, Gould and Meer congratulate us on the fact that while 'across these sites, the category of Muslim might easily have done a lot of analytical work [for us].... in mopping up ambiguity, instead [we] go out of their way to problematize and unsettle conventional readings, such that there is no instrumental use of how Muslim functions as an explanatory variable in and of itself' (Meer).

Our own conclusion, (which, like all our conclusions, emerged out of a deep engagement with embodied history, subjectivity and practice), was that it is simply not possible to speak of 'Islam' as an overarching a priori set of ideas that animated affect and action across time and space. While we take Keith's point that the affective cartography of actions, such as those of the three girls from Bethnal Green Academy who went to Syria, are important, we insist that the cartographies of the less visible Shamsul Huqs and Bibi Hawa's of this world, and indeed of the young boys who run as Paikis during Muharram, are no less revealing. These tell us something rather different about how (shifting) Muslim identities are being mapped and re-mapped anew, and we believe we ought to pay heed to them. Here again, we hope to show how the juxtaposition of different scales, different locations and different stories helps destabilise and de-centre apparently stable (religious) affiliations. For us, and for many of the people in our book, being 'Muslim' is not a singular identity, or indeed, an ascriptive status. It means a whole variety of things and, to some, nothing at all.

So we continue to insist that this is not a book of theory; it is more a book which shows what a particular type of multi-disciplinary, south-facing, methodological engagement might do to theory. We are gratified, however, that all reviewers have recognised the value of the concept of 'mobility capital', which they highlight as widely resonant and transferrable. Mobility capital, we argue, is a bundle of capacities, predispositions and connections which vary between individuals, but are partly located in families and built on wider community

histories, and which are connected (but not reducible) to networks of migration and settlement. As Meer notes, it is useful in that it shows that migration cannot be explained as being an isolated choice and occurs in tandem with wider economic and social forces and histories. The group networks that facilitate this 'can also be embodied' (Meer). For us, 'mobility capital' offers a powerful way of understanding the relationship between mobility and immobility, between agency and structure, and between intimately personal individual stories and long-duree historical processes. The utility of the concept for us is its flexibility and its sensitivity to highly individualised situations as well as broader patterns and transformations. One of the critical aspects of mobility capital, as we discovered, was health – the lack of this one competence (or resource) could make all the difference between moving and not moving in states of extreme pressure and transience. As Redclift notes, it explains as much about the fragility of networks and their rupture as it does about their endurance. Perhaps is where the utility of this concept lies.

Several readers thought the architecture of the book was less than secure – with Gould in particular drawing attention to the 'tension' across the chapters and its 'changing registers'. How to structure this book was always a challenge, and its design a problem we grappled with. We wanted to include chapters that showcased the ways in which individual disciplines engaged with our research questions, their sources and methods. We also deliberately chose the sites we researched so as to 'place' this diaspora in its variety of transnational, national and local contexts, and we wanted to give these places space in the book. The question that we faced was whether to compare the different sites schematically in each chapter or to go for a more thematic approach in which we explored different themes – community, religion, gender/marriage, class, memory – at a particular site in greater depth.

In the end we chose a mixed approach which we recognised would probably satisfy nobody – be they historian, sociologist or anthropologist. Two chapters in the volume directly compared national sites, the others did not. We chose, however, to juxtapose chapters on central themes, locating these in specific national contexts, to allow differences and similarities to emerge from this proximity, while keeping the individual narratives intact and distinct. We hoped that the volume as a whole would reveal to the committed reader the advantages and drawbacks of both approaches.

Pawan Dhingra concludes that the great strength of the book is also its greatest weakness; that in focusing on the 'flesh' of diaspora stories, we have neglected its theoretical 'bones'. We believe, however, that by juxtaposing these stories and sites in ways that 'shift optics' (Keith), and by de-centring and provincializing Western diasporas, we have allowed new concepts to emerge. These include the ideas that diaspora is not necessarily transnational, even as the nation-state plays a structuring role in its formation; that convenient distinctions between forced and economic migration cannot hold; that south-south migration must be brought into our understanding of what diaspora is; that immobility must be as large a part of diaspora theory as mobility itself; and that 'mobility capital'

provides a useful tool for understanding how diasporas are formed and shaped at a variety of scales. Both an impossible project, then, and a necessary one.