A VERY BRITISH HISTORY: BRITISH BANGLADESHIS

Aminul Hoque @BrIslam2015

BEECHWOOD HOUSE

Today's Talk...

– Use the doc *A Very British History: British Bangladeshis* and the 'experience' of migration, as a template to discuss wider issues related to identity, culture, race, community, poverty (working class reality), intergenerational change and continuity

– A feminist approach to research – shining light to often *hidden voices*

– Talk through the *emotionality* of the documentary

– **Methods -** Using (qualitative) life-history, oral-history, documentary film-making (interviews) as a way to research a community and re-tell stories

– Explore the 'response' (community, national, media, international)

– What are some of the current issues?

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British Bangladeshis

The migration narrative of Bangladeshis coming to Britain is a very 'British' story...

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British Bangladeshis

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From HO perspective…

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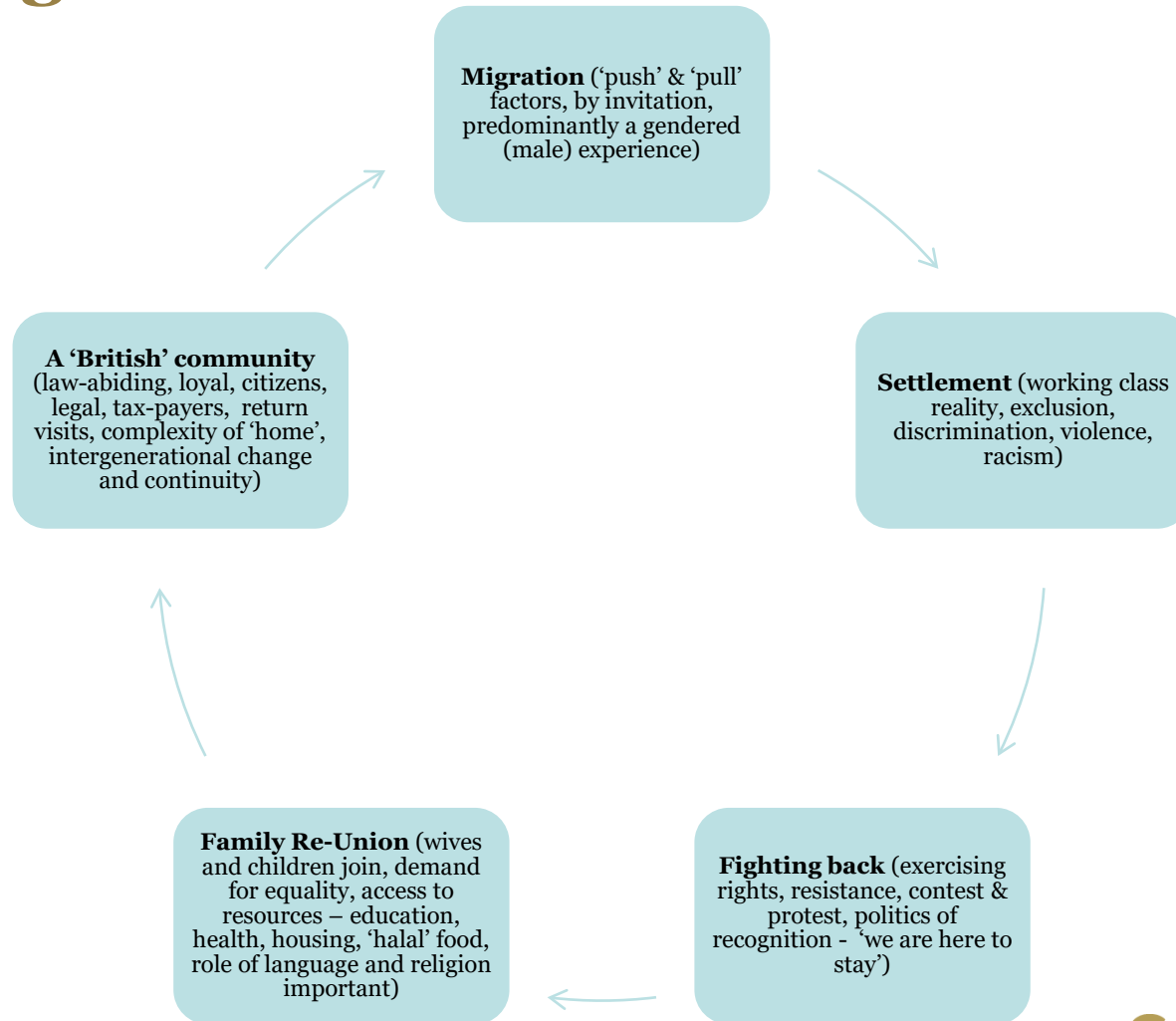
Theoretical ideas

- **Race –** as something that is not real and has been socially constructed as a divisive marker of 'us' and 'them', built on a history of colonial unequal power relations (Ashcroft, 2000)

- **Diaspora** – the construction of transnational diasporic identities is 'social' as opposed to 'natural'. Diaspora – the emotional, political and ideological connection to other people 'like us' – is the transnational workings of identity. The study of modern diaspora offers us new possibilities of understanding the post-modern nature of identity as fluid, complex and dynamic (Gilroy, 1997: 303-04)

- **'Home'** – (Paritus, 2011; Ndlovu, 2010)

- **'Britishness'** – as a social construct, and a series of 'biopolitics' – field of practices, moral, legal, social, media – that includes and excludes certain groups of people as 'British' (Tyler, 2010)

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Post-War Migration – Historical Context

– Britain needed labour after WWII to rebuild the economy, and many immigrants from the Commonwealth nations (the Caribbean, East Africa, Indian subcontinent) came over to work in certain industrial sectors no longer attractive to the domestic workforce

– Britain was now a 'visibly' multi-ethnic/ cultural society

– Indigenous British population, especially in cities, were now overtly exposed to new and diverse cultural, religious and linguistic traditions

– A hostile housing policy and other socio-cultural factors meant that many immigrants were segregated as 'separate' communities often living in impoverished, squalid conditions

– As of Census 2011, approx 513,000 Bangladeshis in England and Wales

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British Bangladeshis – A universal story of migration

Migration ('push' & 'pull' factors, by invitation, predominantly a gendered (male) experience)

Settlement (working class reality, exclusion, discrimination, violence, racism)

Fighting back (exercising rights, resistance, contest & protest, politics of recognition - 'we are here to stay')

Family Re-Union (wives and children join, demand for equality, access to resources – education, health, housing, 'halal' food, role of language and religion important)

A 'British' community (law-abiding, loyal, citizens, legal, tax-payers, return visits, complexity of 'home', intergenerational change and continuity)

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Poverty

Deprivation

Disadvantage

Inequality

Destitution

My child was playing in the kitchen and a rat bit her.

WE ARE BACK

Protest

Contest
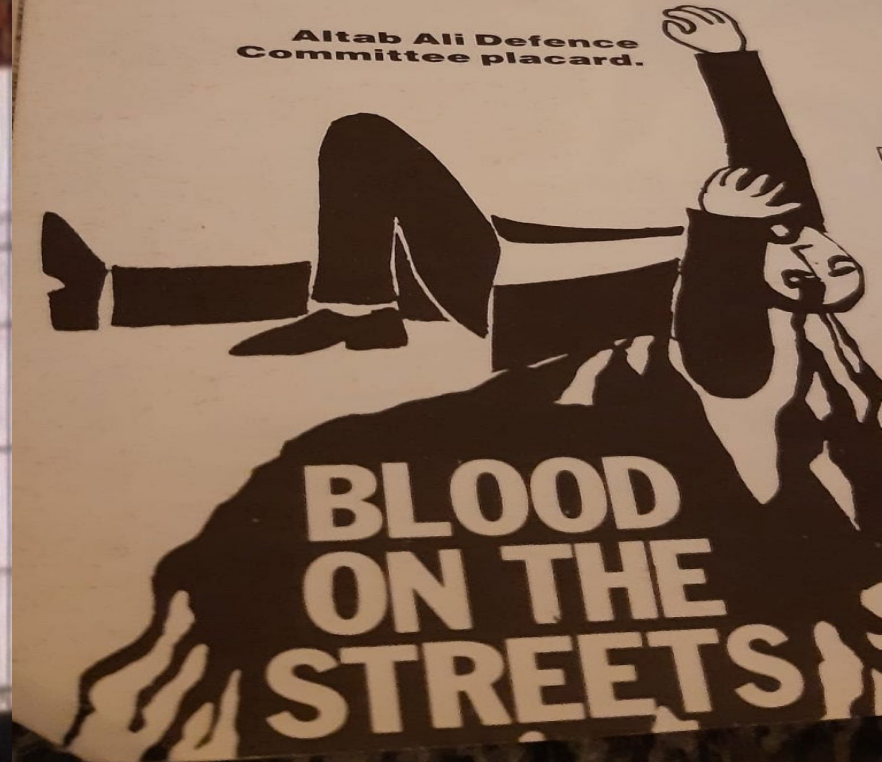
Equality

Resistance

Recognition

Altab Ali Defence
Committee placard.

BLOOD ON THE STREETS

STOP

KKK

NF

Why is this documentary important?

– Is part of a wider BBC4 television series entitled *A Very British History* (#AVBH) and focuses on a variety of migrant communities (Jewish, Romany, Ugandan Indians, Vietnamese, Caribbean, Irish etc) who have settled in the UK

– Shed's light and provides insight on how these communities have contributed positively to the wider socio-cultural scene of British life

– Uncovers invisible, often hidden narratives of underrepresented communities

– Essentially, these personal and historical documentaries are global stories of migration and we get to see and hear of the many narratives of dislocation, upheaval, struggle, resistance, sacrifice, hope and triumph. These are very *'British'* stories

– Relevant also in this current geo-politics of heightened xenophobia, rise of populist nationalism and a climate of hate towards minority communities, as it highlights that migrant communities are just normal, hard-working folk and have hopes, desires, anxieties and aspirations - just like everyone else! #BLM

– Important that we don't forget the stories and also capture these stories of our forefathers/ ancestors

– As a second generation migrant myself, I often wonder whether my own very Westernised **British-born** children have a sense of their 'roots', ancestry and heritage? Where is 'home' for them? And a large part of the documentary focuses deliberately on the 'visit' back to the motherland…
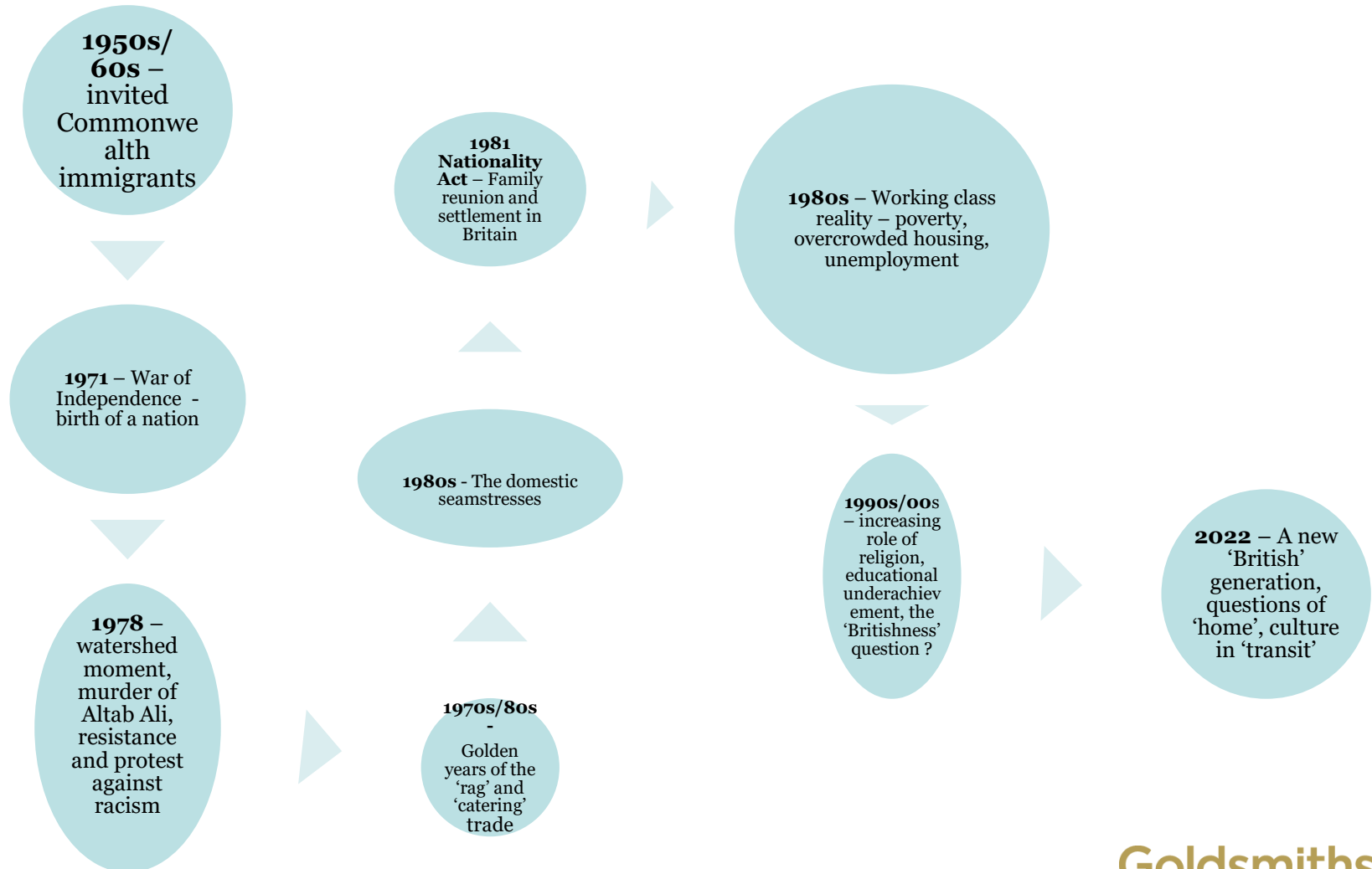
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'This documentary reminds us that we are a normal, hard-working British community. We have fears, hopes, anxieties just like everyone else. We also drink Costa Coffee, watch Netflix and follow our football team passionately' (Hoque quoted in Cox, 2020)

Key objectives of the doc

1. Tells a **universal** story of migration

2. Tells a very **human** story of a community that has been here for the past 60-70 years and has contributed so much to the social, political, cultural scene of Britain

3. Uncovers these **hidden** stories – experience of racism and discrimination in the 1960s, 70s, 80s; the domestic seamstresses; the emotions of the visit back to the motherland with my very *British* children

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Key moments of history...

1950s/ 60s – invited Commonwealth immigrants

1971 – War of Independence - birth of a nation

1978 – watershed moment, murder of Altab Ali, resistance and protest against racism

1981 Nationality Act – Family reunion and settlement in Britain

1980s - The domestic seamstresses

1970s/80s - Golden years of the 'rag' and 'catering' trade

1980s – Working class reality – poverty, overcrowded housing, unemployment

1990s/00s – increasing role of religion, educational underachievement, the 'Britishness' question ?

2022 – A new 'British' generation, questions of 'home', culture in 'transit'

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A very 'British' history

- Many thousands of Sylheti Bengali seafarers fought in the British navy during WWI & WWII
- My fathers generation helped rebuild post-war Britain – steel, cotton mills, car manufacturing, the 'rag' trade
- The 'curry' industry in the 1980s

Where is 'home' ?

Where is 'home'? Is it where you are born? Where you live? Is it to do with legal definition? Where your friends and family are located? Where your childhood memories are? Where you feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging? Is it where you feel safe and accepted and where your childhood memories are situated? Can you have more than one home? Can you feel emotional and ideological attachment to a place you have never visited before? Like culture, do we also need to think of 'home' as something that is in 'transit' (Bhaba, 2004)?

The fractured concept of 'home'

'I love this country. This is my home but I'm also connected spiritually to my motherland. That's ok – to have multiple homes and multifaceted identities. It is what makes humanity so diverse and interesting' (Hoque quoted in Cox, 2020)

Tweet

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Can we ever have more than one 'home'? How do we ensure that our British born western kids stay connected to the #motherland, #ancestry and their #roots. #British&Bangladeshi #Home #Pride #Identity #AVBH. A Very British History: British Bangladeshis, 26th Feb, 9pm @BBCFOUR

Add another Tweet

Other key moments…

- The hidden stories from the seamstresses
- That very 'emotional' moment when I see my mothers entry passport for the very first time with the entry visa stamp
- Meeting and conversing with so many community heroes and inspirational role models
- Giving that space to my father to tell **his** story and then being able to retell this story to a mass audience
- Going back to the country of my birth with my own children, and then hearing about their reflections and experiences
- #Emotional

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Critical response and reception

– Social media was 'buzzing'
– Lots of emails/ letters from people sharing their personal stories of migration

'Pick of the day' @Telegraph, @guardian, @thetimes

'Critic's choice' @theipaper

'Soul-stirring' @Telegraph

Legacy……

– Household conversations (young people watching it with their families)

– Bangladeshi tourism

– A universal story of dislocation, upheaval, sacrifice, memory, struggles, hope, triumph.

I conclude the documentary with the words: 'My hope and aspiration is that they will continue to come – our challenge as parents is how we instil that connection with the motherland – where it began for all of us'.

British-Bangladeshis 2022: *A sociology*

- The question of identity (subjective/ multifaceted) lingers...
- The claim to 'Britishness' is real – fluid/ complex/ subjective/ exclusive/ difficult to grasp and define
- Inter-generational disparity/ conflict (culture, language, technology, ideology)
- Patriarchy is 'real' – educated and confident generation of women pushing the boundaries
- Working-class reality (overcrowding - housing, health disparities, unemployment, service sector/ retail low paid jobs, crime)
- Racism as a 'lived experience' – 'new' cultural racisms of 'difference', Islamophobia
- Diversity among British-Bangladeshis (geography, social class, caste, urban/ rural, education, profession, 'new' European migrants)
- Lack of representation in arts, media, sports

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British-Bangladeshi 2022

Labour Market

- Labour market trends – emergence of a more diverse professional class (away from traditional sectors)

- Still the prevalence of low paid 'low skill' jobs – retail, uber cabs, service sector, catering, manual building labour, delivery drivers etc

- Working in the community, family businesses – 'cash in hand'

Education

- Academic achievement above national average at GCSE, A-levels but NOT at degree level – degree attainment low, also lack of representation at Russell Group Universities

- Parental/ sibling support, emergence of tutor centres (exam factories), teachers governed by league tables, a more literate generation

- Academic achievement and labour market – mismatch

- Institutional racism is a 'lived experience'

- 'poverty of aspirations' still a factor

- A new generation of role models emerging (educated professionals, business people etc)

COVID-19 – a working class reality

- Intergenerational households
- Overcrowded houses
- Caring responsibilities (cultural)
- Service sector employment ('too nice & compliant')
- Mistrust in the health service
- Underlying health issues?

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The debate continues...

Aminul Hoque

Department of Educational Studies, Goldsmiths College, University of London

a.hoque@gold.ac.uk

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