

Diaspora youth and British young men of colour

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In post-recession Britain, youth unemployment remains stubbornly high. In 2013, for example, one in five people aged between 16 and 24 were not in employment, education or training (compared with an eight per cent rate overall) and young men were more likely to be unemployed than young women (23.4 per cent compared with 18.4 per cent). Young men of colour, British-born and recent migrants, are particularly disadvantaged in the search for a job in a labour market where casual and precarious unemployment is increasingly common.

We interviewed 80 young men in Luton and Swindon about their search for work, to assess the significance of connections within diasporic communities and between second and third generations of in-migrants to the UK. There is evidence that members of minority communities, especially those with few workplace credentials, often find work through personal contacts within their own group.

In both towns, many men we talked to were of South Asian heritage, from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, there were significant differences between them: in Luton the men were members of long-established communities, with fathers or grandfathers who had migrated to the UK from the 1970s onwards, attracted by jobs in the then expanding car industry. In Swindon, there was a group of young men of Goan origin who had moved to the UK within the last ten years and who had few existing contacts in the town. For both groups, the history of migration was not straightforward. In Luton, early migrants typically were from East Africa, as the Africanisation policies of newly independent states reduced their prospects. In Swindon, the imperial heritage of Goa, a Portuguese colony until 1975,

led to a different pattern, as the fathers of the men we interviewed moved variously to Angola, Macau and Mozambique or to Portugal.

The men in Luton had long-established networks of contacts to draw on. Luton is one of the most diverse towns in the UK, second only to London in terms of its black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) population, approaching 30 per cent of the total. It is also a town where racialised harassment is common, through the street protests organised by neo-fascist groups such as the English Defence League. In Swindon, the BAME population is only five per cent of the total (the national average is almost 13 per cent), and has a shorter history of settlement. The total Goan population in the UK is small and mainly concentrated in London. Goans typically are Christians and have few links with other groups of South Asian backgrounds.

Claiming membership: British, European or ‘Asian’?

One of the defining features of a diaspora is its constitution through a set of networks, organisations and common cultural beliefs and practices. Although inaccurately referred to as ‘Asians’ in the UK, the mainly South Asian population in Luton consists of people whose origins lie in what is now Pakistan and Bangladesh. Safraz Mansoor, a journalist, is a Luton-born second generation South Asian. Here he is talking about his father’s decision to migrate in the 1970s:

I imagine that my father arrived in Britain with a mixture of fear and hope... He was leaving the sunshine of Karachi, a wife and young family. He worked at the Vauxhall car plant. (Mansoor 2002)

The men whom we interviewed told similar stories and, by the second decade of the new millennium, were part of a diaspora community only in the sense of their adherence to Islam and through various forms of organisation in response to racist harassment. They all identified as ‘hyphenated-British’ – British-Muslim, British-Asian, British-Bengali – representing their identity as hybrid with links to both ‘here’ and ‘there’, a homeland which most of them had never visited but learnt about through talk at home or in the mosque.

The Goan young men in Swindon, first- rather than second-generation in-migrants, maintained closer links with other Goans,

a community in the UK of perhaps 5,000 in total, represented by the Goan Association in London to which some of the interviewees belonged. They differentiated themselves from other British Asians, in part because of their Christian beliefs. Jonah said: 'People shout at me in the street – dirty Paki, go home Muslims, things like that. But that isn't us.' They are also differentiated by their citizenship. Michael said: 'I came from Goa, but my Dad has a Portuguese passport so Dad actually made me a Portuguese citizen... It is much better to be a Portuguese citizen right now'.

Finding work: the importance of personal networks

One advantage conferred by diaspora membership is a set of networks that might help in securing employment. Many young men in Luton reported that they had found work through their fathers, other relatives or friends of the family and their peers. As Mumtaz told us: 'My dad's friend, he runs a taxi business and he took me on in the office'. Mohammed said: 'My friend works... one of my other friends... they work in a warehouse and he said he'll try and get me in'. Another man explained: 'My dad, he works for the post office and he spoke up for me when they had a job'.

In Swindon, there were fewer opportunities to draw on personal contacts and youths turned to employment agencies to find work. James told us: 'I apply for jobs online. All the agencies are online so you have to register with them and then they see a particular job for you, then they put you in for that'. Philip, who moved to Swindon in 2010, told us: 'When I got here it was the complete opposite of what I'd heard – no admin work, no vacancies at all. I work through an agency for a warehouse company'. As he explained, diasporic networks were important in Swindon, but among Poles:

The team leaders are all Polish – it is done through personal networks so I have no chance. I think Goans face rejection when applying for work but we don't raise our voices to complain. This is not a proper system to make people work well.

Only one man had been able to use community networks to earn a living. Laurence ran a successful small business, taking photos at

social events organised by the small Goan community in Swindon.

What sort of jobs? Feminised service sector employment

In Luton and Swindon, well-paid 'male' jobs, including in the car industry, are declining, replaced by jobs in the fast food industry, in hospitality, and in the retail clothing trade, for example, in which customer relations and a deferential performance are important. Men, and especially minority men, are often disadvantaged in these forms of employment. They chafe at regulation and restrictions. Momtaz in Luton: 'I like to be physical, I hate being inside, in one place.'

Men not born in the UK find their style, their voice, their lack of familiarity with conventional assumptions about acceptable social relations disadvantages them in their search for work. Here is Michael in Swindon: 'I could speak English properly but I obviously had an Indian accent and found it very hard to understand what people were saying'. James, failing a customer relations test in a fast food outlet – 'I told them I'll be nice. I'll be good to the person' – managed to hit the wrong tone through a lack of familiarity with the fine line between service and servility.

For all the men we interviewed, finding work was a central concern. In 2013, they were determined and resilient, countering media images of disaffected youth. Their community involvement was a source of strength, especially in Luton, but all mentioned racialised harassment by 'locals'. In 2015, post-*Charlie Hebdo*, for young men of 'Asian' appearance, whether Muslim or not, the climate is now even more austere and their search for work more difficult. □

References

Mansoor, S. (2002) 'You're Muslim, you'll never be English.' *Guardian*, 18 June, <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2002/jun/19/familyandrelationships.religion>