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*Diasporic Business Connections:
An Examination of the Role of Female Entrepreneurs in a
South Asian Business District*

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Abstract

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This paper seeks to explore the complex interplay between the moments of production and consumption by highlighting the pivotal role played by Asian businesswomen in serving an emerging niche market -- Asian designer retail wear, especially the salwaar kameez -- which is identified by class and gender. These businesses are run from a dynamic Asian business district in the East Midlands, UK. I focus on their role in the production and consumption process, highlighting connections within the ‘multi-locale’ Asian diaspora.

key words

Asian diaspora

production chain

consumption

business district

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Introduction

Doreen Massey (1994, 121) has argued that places can be thought of not so much as bounded areas but “as open and porous networks for social relations.” The geography of social relations highlights interconnectedness. In this paper, I focus on diasporas, through an examination of business connections within the Asian diaspora as one example of interconnectedness (Clifford 1994; Cohen 1997). The utility of the concept of diasporas today rests largely upon the degree to which it can deal with the problematics of late twentieth century transnational movements of people, capital, commodities, technologies, information and cultural forms (Brah 1996, 241). It articulates with that of ‘borders,’ a social construction with everyday effects on real lives. What is common to diasporas is an ethnocultural identity derived from a territorial origin and local history within a space of reference (Bruneau 1995).

The literature on diasporas intersects with that on transnational capital and minority ethnic enterprise. Some recent work on diasporic connections and transnational capital have identified people directing these flows of capital (MaMung 1995; Thrift and Olds 1996). Thrift and Olds (1996, 324) note that business networks based on ethnicity have several functions, including carrying business-related information; encouraging mutual aid, ranging from advice to preferential purchasing; they can according to density encourage entrepreneurship; and can enhance trust. For example, overseas Chinese capitalism is anchored around networks of family firms in which the male head of household plays a key role in defining strategy from the smallest firm to the largest transnational conglomerate (ibid., 325).

Studies of minority ethnic enterprise have included the exploitation of an ‘minority ethnic niche’ and the development of an ‘ethnic enclave’ as a survival strategy (Light and Bhachu 1993; Patel 1991). Such enclaves are often within specific labour markets. Studies have focused on the extent to which entrepreneurship is a response to discrimination, its impact on the urban economy, and the need for policies targeted towards the specific needs of minority ethnic businesses (Barrett et al. 1996). Patel’s (1991) account of the development of South Asian businesses in Birmingham is largely presented as a ‘survival’ strategy. Within this literature there is also a growing recognition of the role of minority ethnic women in business (Barrett et al. 1996; Morokvasic 1991). Morokvasic’s comparative study of five European countries summarises these roles of a woman as: ensuring the survival and/or the success of minority ethnic businesses run by men by providing family or community labour; being the ‘hidden partner’ in family businesses; and being an entrepreneur in her ‘own right’ (Morokvasic, 1991).

Minority ethnic-owned clothing companies, especially South Asian-owned, according to Annie Phizacklea (1990, 11) have played a key role in the survival of the British clothing sector. These highly flexible inner city firms produce garments that are competitive with foreign suppliers (Ram 1996, 159). Ram's research on the West Midlands clothing sector has concluded that the sector developed more as a product of racism and recession rather than enterprise culture (ibid., 163). The West Midlands companies tend not to be tied to retailers directly, but sell their products through intermediaries, wholesalers who are often themselves South Asian. Those who try to break out of the 'ethnic niche,' utilise white intermediaries as agents (ibid., 164). The viability of the sector rests upon the intensive use of South Asian female labour working either from home or in small sweatshops (Phizacklea 1990). Others have noted that the extensive use of familial labour is an important factor in explaining the viability of minority ethnic enterprise (Mars and Ward 1984). Ram's (1996, 170) survey of West Midlands South Asian-owned clothing companies revealed that they tend to be managed by male family members, with machinists supervised by the women of the family, who were often the spouses of the managers, but "women were rarely accorded the status of managers" (ibid., 171).

In this paper, I seek to explore the complex interplay between the minority enterprise and transnational capital through a study of high status garment retailing in a South Asian business district, the Belgrave area of Leicester (Figure 1). In particular, I focus on the role of East African Asian women -- partners in family businesses and entrepreneurs in their own right -- who are 'key actors' in the production and consumption of exclusive designer wear, such as ready-to-wear *salwaar kameez*² and highly embroidered special occasion saris,³ which are manufactured in India and retailed within the 'multi-locale' South Asian diaspora. Power and decision making relating to the production chain lies with women entrepreneurs in the Belgrave area of Leicester (Hardill and Raghuram 1998). Second, diasporic populations maintain linkages

¹ The term 'Asian' was a collective term used to differentiate people who originated from the Indian subcontinent from the African and European populations in East Africa (Bujra 1992). It has now been transposed to define all people originating from the Indian subcontinent, whether migrating directly or indirectly to Great Britain and I use this transposition in this paper.

² The *salwaar kameez* is a Punjabi dress composed of two garments, a long shirt and loose trousers. Different styles are worn by men and women. Today the globally scattered Punjabi and non-Punjabi origin Asian populations are unifying around clothing consumption by wearing the *salwaar kameez* for social occasions. Garments used to be either made at home or made to measure. Today ready-to-wear garments are revolutionising women's wear in the Asian diaspora.

³ A *sari* is a length of cotton or silk wrapped around the body, worn as the main garment by Hindu women. Some companies now retail one-off woven saris with embroidery for wedding trousseaux, which can cost thousands of pounds.

both with 'home' and with other parts of the diaspora. These diasporic connections are being used to serve an emerging market for clothing which is defined by class and gender. South Asian diasporic populations are themselves internally differentiated along lines of gender and class. The exploitation of these differences has created the new forms of enterprise, of which the case studies reported in this paper are examples.

The South Asian Diaspora⁴

The national context

The South Asian population in Great Britain forms a mosaic of groups, whose origins lie in post-war migration from different parts of the Indian subcontinent, other parts of Asia, East Africa and the West Indies (Robinson 1996). Today it numbers over 1.5 million and practices many religions, speaks many languages, and includes people from varied socio-economic backgrounds (Owen 1996: Robinson 1996). The South Asian population is very unevenly distributed spatially, being largely concentrated in England and in inner city locations (Peach 1996, 232-3; see also May 1996). It has also become apparent that the experiences of direct migrants (who came directly from their place of origin) and indirect migrants (for whom the migration to Great Britain is only the most recent stage of a diverse migration trajectory, over several generations) are also varied.

The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a growing social polarisation within South Asian communities, with those who were indirect migrants emerging as the real 'winners'⁵. New divisions are emerging within South Asian communities, with polarisation in educational attainment, professionalisation and entrepreneurial activity (Phillips and Sarre 1995). The social class profile is bimodal, with both a relatively large percentage in the upper echelons of white collar work (Social Classes 1 and 2) and also a large percentage of people in semi-skilled manual work (Social Class 4). Unemployment levels in some of the South Asian communities (Pakistanis and Bangladeshis) are relatively high (Owen 1996). But Indians experience unemployment rates lower than all other minority ethnic groups except the Chinese. High levels of self employment are recorded

⁴ In July 1998 the fifth conference of representatives of the Global Union of Peoples of Indian Origin was held in South Africa. Two themes discussed were developing satellite and air links for the 22 million members of the Asian diaspora (BBC World Service, July 12th 1998).

⁵ While the 'success stories' are dominated by indirect migrants, some direct migrants have also become successful. For example, G.K. Noon and Perween Warsi who between them provide the bulk of Indian food retailed in the major British supermarkets, are both direct migrants. Also, the migration of professional people directly from the Indian subcontinent during the last two decades has contributed to the further complexities of this social polarisation (Phillips and Sarre 1995).

especially by East African Asian men and women (Metcalf et al. 1996; Owen 1995).⁶ There are reported to be more than 350 South Asian millionaires, many of whom narrate a 'rags to riches story' (Robinson 1996). There also appears to be a strong gender dimension in this 'success' story; South Asian men appear to have benefitted more than South Asian women (Owen 1995).

Migration to Leicester

A total of 23.7 per cent of Leicester's population is South Asian (Leicester City Council 1994, 17). Given the fact that the age profile of South Asian residents is younger than the white population, the proportion of the city's workforce which is South Asian may be slightly higher (ibid.). The first South Asian migrants to Leicester in the post war period were direct migrants from the Punjab and Gujarat, who came in response to the demand for unskilled labour during the post war economic boom. Most of these migrants were rural dwellers -- lone males -- from an area where unemployment levels were high. Upon arrival in Leicester they formed a tight-knit community and in order to maximise their ability to save, these groups established lodging houses in the Highfields area of Leicester (Nash and Reeder 1993; Figure 1). Familial and kin groups provided sources of information, money and other types of support to prospective and new migrants (Ballard 1990). When they were eventually joined by their families, they settled in Highfields where there was a plentiful supply of cheap rented accommodation (Nash and Reeder 1993).

Most East African Asians arrived after 1972. As Phillips (1981, 104, cited in O'Connor 1995) suggests, East African Asians, "now constitute the dominant sub-group in the Leicester Asian community and, as far as can be assessed, form one of the largest clusters of refugees in the country." From 1968-1978, Leicester received more than 20,000 displaced East African Asians, more than anywhere else in the Great Britain (Nash and Reeder 1993, 27). In the late 1960s Leicester was the main destination for East African Asian families displaced as a consequence of persecution, in the case of Uganda, and the process of Africanization of business and public services elsewhere in East Africa (Cohen 1997). Their, "entry was prompted primarily by political events but they were attracted to Leicester for mainly economic reasons" (Nash and Reeder 1993, 85).

They settled in the city largely because of an existing active South Asian community, which was at that time largely composed of direct migrants. The arrival of large numbers of these migrants in the 1970s

⁶ South Asian women record self employment rates of 13 per cent compared with 6.6 per cent for white women (Owen 1993). Recent work on motivations and strategies indicated that the current high rates of self-employment will alter in the future with parents' desires for their children to enter the professions, for example (Metcalf et al. 1996).

put pressure on the housing stock in the city, particularly in the Highfields area. Although many of the earlier East African Asian migrants had gravitated to Highfields, later arrivals looked for and found accommodation elsewhere (O'Connor 1995, 17).

The East African Asian refugees differed from the earlier direct migrants from Gujarat and the Punjab who had settled in Leicester. Perhaps the most important difference was that many East African Asian migrants were refugees and involuntary migrants. In addition to their strong trading, business and professional backgrounds and good knowledge of English, the East African Asians tended to arrive as complete families, including ageing parents and relatives (Clarke et al. 1990). As a result their housing needs and aspirations differed significantly from those predominately single migrants from other countries (O'Connor 1995, 18). And some were able to bring some, if not all of their savings. The availability of capital was to be of great importance in the development of new communities in the city (Nash and Reeder 1993).

The emergence of the Belgrave and Melton Road as an area of South Asian settlement can be attributed to this period and the arrival of East African Asians. As Marrett (1989) points out, from the 1950s onward South Asians in Leicester were faced with an overall shortage of private rented housing, hostile landlords and little hope of obtaining public rented housing. In addition, there was a strong desire amongst the East African Asian migrants to purchase property as an investment. After what was a brief stay in the Highfields area -- historically, the traditional area for new migrants to Leicester⁷-- with relatives or friends, they wanted to purchase homes of their own. As the supply of houses in the Highfields area was not sufficient to meet demand, the East African Asian families began to look elsewhere in the city. They settled in the Belgrave area which was depopulating, and quickly established an incipient community to which many new arrivals moved directly (Nash and Reeder 1993).

In 1981, Belgrave ward had the largest number of East African residents in the city, comprising 14.7 per cent of the ward's population (O'Connor 1995, 18). The growth and suburbanisation of the South Asian community in Leicester has continued. The 1991 Census of Population highlighted the breakdown of the concentration of the central Belgrave ward as a place of East African Asian residence, but not of East African Asian enterprise (Leicester City Council 1994; O'Connor 1995).

⁷The Highfields area was the destination for a succession of migrations by individuals and families including East European Jews in the nineteenth century, displaced Europeans after both the First and Second World Wars, and the Hungarian uprising of 1956, and direct migrants from Asia (from the Punjab and Gujarat), Eire and the West Indies from the 1950s (Nash and Reeder 1993, 183-91).

Labour-market experiences

While today the East African Asian 'success story' is widely narrated, we should not forget that the initial labour market experience of the displaced persons was not always positive (Bell 1997). In a comparative study of Ugandan Asians in Great Britain, Canada and India, Adams and Jesudason (1984) reported on interviews undertaken 12-16 months after their expulsion. Ugandan Asians were interviewed in Leicester as well as in London, Glamorgan and Midlothian. They noted that among those who had found work, two-thirds experienced downward occupational mobility (*ibid.* 474), and many had lost all their assets. Although East African Asians are undoubtedly predisposed to self employment (Burja 1992; Clarke et al. 1990), labour market discrimination also played its part in the route to self employment in Great Britain (see also Leicester City Council 1994; Ram 1996).

The 1991 Census of Employment revealed that South Asian-owned businesses in Leicester are clustered in other manufacturing (textiles, hosiery and knitwear) and in distribution and catering (Leicester City Council 1994, 30). In 1994, Leicester City Council (1994, 29) identified 446 South Asian owned businesses in the city, clustered in retail (SIC 6), which accounted for 540 businesses in all (37 per cent). A further 391 businesses (27 per cent) were in textiles (SIC 4) (*ibid.*, 31)⁸. The Council surveyed 408 businesses, 91 per cent of which were owned by men, 4 per cent owned by women and 5 per cent indicated that they had both male and female partners/owners (*ibid.*, 39). Four out of five of the businesses considered themselves to be 'family businesses,' with little variation across economic sector or company size (*ibid.*, 45). The perceived advantages and disadvantages of family businesses were explored in in-depth interviews with a sub-set of 60 of the 408 companies. The main advantages were seen to be: 'trust;' 'loyalty;' 'mutual understanding;' and 'better understanding.' Others comments were: 'everyone was working to the same aims;' 'family workers work harder;' 'being able to take decisions more quickly;' and 'being able to borrow money from family members more cheaply than from the bank' (*ibid.*, 45-6). More than half of the 60 companies surveyed indicated that there were no disadvantages. The only frequently cited disadvantage was that it could 'cause disputes within the family' or 'put a strain on relationships, particularly if the business was doing poorly'. Other disadvantages cited were: 'feeling trapped;' 'not having complete control;' 'not being able to tell them off;' and 'difficulty in getting time off work' (*ibid.*, 46).

⁸The Council recorded that this figure is an underestimate because many businesses are not identifiable as South Asian-owned from their names alone (Leicester City Council 1994, 29).

Half of the owners of the 408 surveyed companies indicated that they set up in business ‘to be their own boss;’ for 38 per cent it was ‘a chance to make a better living;’ and 16 per cent said that ‘their family had always done this/it is a family business’ (ibid., 118). While the survey has given a picture of South Asian-owned businesses in general in Leicester, no analysis was undertaken of the minority of businesses with women owners/partners. This paper attempts to address this lacuna for businesses owned by East African Asian women in Leicester.

A case study of female minority-owned businesses in Leicester, England

The empirical evidence presented in this paper is drawn from case study material collected in a larger study of minority ethnic⁹ people in business in the Midlands, Great Britain. This study focussed on key questions raised by user groups such as business associations in the Midlands. Through contacts with minority ethnic businesses engaged in different sectors of the economy, a self-completion questionnaire survey was undertaken. Ten of those who completed the questionnaires subsequently participated in face-to-face interviews. A collective case study approach was used along with qualitative research methods (face-to-face interviews).

During the course of an average 45 minutesemi-structured interview we covered such issues as how the owner of the business became involved in the business, the business today, and the future of the business. In this paper I use information from four of the case studies, which were deliberately chosen because of commonalities. The four case studies involve East African Asian women in their thirties, whose families have been engaged in entrepreneurial activities for several generations, but prior to their involvement the nature of these activities had been largely shaped by male family members. All four identified ‘a market opportunity’ themselves, but while all have been well educated, when it comes to their experience of access to family/community resources to capitalise on their business idea, the case study single women have not had access to family resources, while the case study married women have (Figure 2). The four case studies are engaged in the retailing of exclusive garments. As the Leicester City Council (1994, 31) survey noted retailing is the second most important business activity of South Asian-owned businesses. By using qualitative research methods in this project the interrelated cultural, social, political and economic

⁹ Self-definitions of ‘ethnicity’ have been used embracing the idea of ethnicity as a situational rather than an independent category. In the project we felt that ethnicity is contextual rather than absolute.

complexities of entrepreneurial activity in the Belgrave area of Leicester has been mapped (van Manen 1990).

Many feminist researchers have adopted smaller scale, qualitative methodological strategies which aim to break down hierarchical objective ways of knowing (England 1994). Such an approach with more flexible and open methodologies allows one to, “incorporate difference and acknowledge the partiality and situatedness of our knowledges” (Staheli and Lawson 1994, 99).

I as a white researcher did not interview the women, but I did initiate the process through establishing contact with Malini (Figure 2), who in addition to running a multinational business was also a part-time postgraduate student on a Masters’ course in Fashion and Textiles that I teach on at Nottingham Trent University. Following Malini’s interview other East African Asian business women were identified by snowballing. Young South Asian women interviewees were used, of a similar age to the interviewees, with whom they could share their life story.¹⁰ In-depth semi-structured interviews (using an aide memoire) were thus undertaken “to convey the inner life and texture of the diverse social enclaves and personal circumstance” (Jackson, 1985, cited in England 1994, 84) of the women’s business activities.

I use a collective case study approach (Hamel 1992; Stake 1994; Yin 1989) to elucidate the role and significance of diasporic links in market and supply chains. In this study, a supply chain (or production chain/filière) refers to a series of economically and technically inter-linked operations placed between the availability of the raw material and that of the finished product (see Crewe and Lowe 1995; Ford et al. 1996; Hardill and Wynarczyk 1996).

¹⁰ The interviews were taped after permission was granted by the interviewees. The transcribed text was sent to the interviewees. They then allowed the researchers to use the text (see Nast 1994).

Figure 2

Case studies of East African Asian women in business

Malini (Company 1) is in her early 30s. Her family migrated from Gujarat to Zambia in 1948, where they retailed children's clothing. Her father then migrated to the Midlands in 1954, being joined by his wife and two children in 1958. Malini was born in the Midlands where her parents owned a grocery shop. She wanted to go into business, but no family money was forthcoming, "not a penny, my mother wouldn't give it to me, not a single penny has come from my family. She didn't approve of me going into business initially because its the usual scenario you know, you have graduated and you should get married. Parents always want to give everything to their boys, the girls have to struggle." But eight years ago she joined the wife and son of the founder of Company 1. All three are East African Asians. The business, "went limited," and thanks to Malini the clothing retail business was transformed. It now "sells Indian clothes, but they are modern stuff, as well as traditional". Her male business partner Rajiv, "always feels that I am on a female mission and he is very supporting." They own two other retail outlets in dynamic South Asian retail centres in London. Their garments are manufactured in India, "about eighty per cent [is for the 'British market']...besides our three retail outlets we sell to other people...and export to Mauritius, South Africa and America." They employ 41 in Great Britain and 7 in an office in India.

Kala (Company 2) is in her late 30s. Her family (parents, elder brother and she) left Kenya in 1973 and settled in London. Her father first worked for an insurance company and her mother in a factory, but then they acquired a newsagents shop. Her in-laws (from Zambia) began trading in 1983, but, "once I joined in 1984, bringing fresh ideas and new things to do ... silk shoes, salwaar kameez ... things increased ... now we have bigger premises." The ready-made garments sold in their Leicester shop are made in Bombay, India and the owners make regular trips to India as they are involved in the "designs and choice of material." They employ four people in their Leicester shop plus about six people elsewhere. Ninety percent of their customers are South Asian, especially "Zambian Asians," many of whom they know personally.

Indira (Company 3) is 40 years old. Her family (parents and elder brother) left Kenya in 1975, where they had a retail outlet. Her family by marriage established the shop in 1991 in Leicester and retails, "clothing - exclusive wear. There was a market for Asian designer wear ... we established the shop six years ago because nobody was doing that [designer wear] for Asian ladies." The shop is "a boutique ... ladies, gents, children's, exclusive." The business is owned by her father-in-law, husband and herself. Indira had the idea for the shop: "my husband supported me all the way." The Leicester shop employs four women and they also have a second fashion retail shop in Birmingham. About sixty percent of the stocks for the shop come from India and Pakistan, and the majority of their customers are South Asian. When asked about plans for the future of the business, it was "expansion and looking forward [to opening] more outlets."

Rama (Company 4) is in her 30s, and her family migrated from Kenya, where they had lived since the 1920s. Her grandfather had established a business in Kenya in the 1920s and her father and his two brother ran the business which comprised a grocery shop, a crockery shop and a printing press. Her family moved to Great Britain in 1979. She is still single: "I still live with my parents and as they are my parents I love to do things for them." Company 4 is a sole proprietorship which was opened by Rama. Like Malini, Rama had a business idea, "my parents and other family members have supported me [they] all thought I was mad. I have had moral support from friends and family but to start with my own family thought 'oh it's a whim she's going through,' but it's been my dream and I worked damned hard to make that come true." Her parents and other members of her family supported -- morally not financially -- her decision to open her designer wear shop. But before this she "used to be a hairdresser ... when Asian girls didn't do hairdressing. I worked for someone else ... then I opened my own salon. Then I started studying again ... I had always had a passion for fabrics." She gets her fabrics from India: "I physically go there, I buy my own fabrics, I get embroiderers ... and garments stitched to my specifications ... in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Delhi, Bombay and in the South."

Source: Minority Ethnic Business Survey, 1996-7

The Belgrave business district: global meets local

The development of the business district

By the late 1970s, the Belgrave area of Leicester had been transformed by the entrepreneurial activities of the East African Asian community, becoming a flourishing manufacturing, wholesale and retail business district (Nash and Reeder 1993, 86). The area provided a pool of South Asian labour, especially of women (Morokvasic 1991). And there was also a substantial stock of industrial premises vacated as a consequence of recession and the decline of older traditional locally-owned firms. The Leicester City Council South Asian business survey (1994, 38) revealed that one third of the surveyed companies were owned by East African Asians. These firms accounted for: 36 per cent of all the surveyed South Asian-owned engineering companies; 14 per cent of textile companies; 35 per cent of other manufacturing companies; 40 per cent of wholesalers; 46 per cent of retailers; 18 per cent of catering companies; 38 per cent of professional services and 54 per cent of other services (ibid., 39). And East African Asian-owned businesses remain clustered in the Belgrave ward (ibid., 33)

The four case study companies are engaged in retailing exclusive garments, while all four come from families with a tradition of self employment, for Malini and Rama (Companies 1 and 4, Figure 2) this was not in clothing retailing. Kala and Indira's (Companies 2 and 3, Figure 2) families by marriage had established businesses in textiles and clothing in the 1970s in the Belgrave area. This is illustrated with reference to Kala's parents-in-law who:

“Had a shop in Zambia, they moved to Leicester in 1973, and bought property here

... with other parts of the family in 1977 ... in textile wholesaling.” (Company 2.)

Company 2 subsequently opened a retail outlet in 1983, which Kala began running in 1984. Company 3 has diversified from textiles manufacture into retailing following Indira's recognition of the new market (see Figure 2). These two companies thus opened retail outlets on the Belgrave Road/Melton Road to supplement their other textile-related activities in the Belgrave area. They also serve to illustrate the fact that often East African Asian businesses span manufacturing, wholesaling and retailing. In Kala's case the existing rather traditional family clothing retail outlet was transformed by her, while Indira's family by marriage provided the resources to support her business idea:

“There was a market for designer wear. Nobody was doing that for Asian ladies.” Indira,

Company 3.)

But both Malini and Rama's parents owned businesses. For example, Malini's (Company 1) family was:

“In the grocery trade, would you believe, supermarket, and I wasn’t doing that, packing potatoes.”

South Asian owned businesses are supported by such organisations as the Leicester Asian Business Association (LABA), which has its offices in the Belgrave area. LABA recognises the role of women as ‘entrepreneurs in their own right,’ as Kala (Company 2) noted:

“There was a women’s conference organised [by LABA] last year [1996]. That was interesting but nothing has been taken up from there.”

Rama has also:

“been to several Asian business ladies meetings.” (Rama Company 4.)

In the Belgrave area, there is also a women’s support organisation:

“It’s a very old organisation which supports women in all sorts of stratas [*sic*]. I really believe in what they do. They are the only organisation that helps everyone and it’s a support mechanism.” (Malini Company 1.)

But all four interviewees indicated that they had very limited involvement in business organisations because of other commitments. They all invested many hours a day in running the business. Malini (Company 1) mentioned:

“I was a speaker [at the LABA Conference]. It was lovely the support from the people there. Unfortunately I don’t get enough time to get involved, especially now I am going to university as well.” (Malini Company 1.)

The two married women, also had dependent children and emphasised the ‘double shift’ (Newell 1993):

“As a woman you are running a home, running a family. And that really stretches you in all kinds of ways. And in an Asian set-up it’s not always easy to rely on your husband and the rest of the family.” (Kala Company 2.)

The Belgrave area certainly possesses a specific ‘industrial atmosphere’. While the companies are deeply rooted in the South Asian diaspora, they are also firmly embedded in the social context of their diasporic East African Asian community in Leicester, but a community which is strongly patriarchal. And as will be discussed below the success of the interviewees’ companies is heavily dependent on having retail outlets in the ‘right’ location along Belgrave Road/Melton Road. In essence the socio-economic milieu provides an ‘organising context’ for entrepreneurial activity (Gertler 1997; Piore and Sabel 1984). The Belgrave area is a networking community through a variety of formal and informal alliances. What makes the Belgrave area distinctive from Crewe’s (1996) description of the Lace Market in Nottingham is through the use of diasporic connections, for example with India for raw materials and manufactured goods, exporting

to markets elsewhere in the diaspora, in the use of community networks to identify markets and in capitalising on the success of the Belgrave Road/Melton Road South Asian retail complex. Thus while there are important local linkages and local synergies, there are also strong linkages both with 'home' and with other parts of the diaspora for both production and wholesaling, while the location of their retail outlets is vital for effective consumption. Although power and decision making for the exclusive clothing *habillièr*e rests with East African Asian women in Leicester,¹¹ the South Asian business world whether in Leicester, India or elsewhere in the diaspora remains a 'man's world' (Leicester City Council 1994, 39).

The South Asian diaspora: a man's world?

The interviewees were asked about male attitudes to them being business women. Three themes emerged, patriarchal attitudes within the family, patriarchal attitudes on Belgrave Road/Melton Road, and doing business in India. As was noted earlier, the two solo case study women were denied access to family resources, while the married women were (Figure 2). Malini, for example highlighted patriarchal attitudes at home:

"parents always want to give everything to their boys, the girls have to struggle." (Malini Company 1.)

But South Asian business is also very much a 'man's world', as Malini said:

"Any shop in Belgrave Road there is a guy there, be it a jewellery shop or a clothing shop whatever there is always a guy there." (Malini Company 1)

She was asked if it was the same in London:

"It's the same it must be a man it can't be a woman on her own. Why do they think that men are the only people on God's earth that can run a shop?" (Malini Company 1.)

Rama (Company 4) also emphasised patriarchal business relations from the perspective of being a single woman:

"we still live in a world that is very male dominated. They don't seem to think that you can run a business on your own, without having a husband there, without having the family there giving you handouts and that is what I have fought all my life." (Rama Company 3.)

When Kala talked about taking over the shop from her family she said:

"It was going into a man's world, but discrimination in inverted commas because they'd been used to seeing my father-in-law ... they wouldn't take me seriously and there were a lot of cases where

¹¹ Cohen (1997) has described parallel developments with members of other diasporic communities.

people would come and say, 'I want to talk to [father-in-law]'. I would say, 'well I'm the manager and if you don't want to talk to me then fair enough, there isn't anyone else you can talk to.'" (Kala Company 2.)

Although her in-laws are 'the boss,' family resources have been made available to enable her to realise her ideas.

Doing business in India is not always straightforward, there are problems as Kala indicated:

"[in the beginning] because I didn't know the ropes. It was difficult to establish yourself, to be taken seriously." (Company 2.)

She went on to say:

"It's difficult to work in India unless you know the right people, the right contacts, you must have a good exporter, a good supplier over there." (Company 2.)

The patriarchal nature of Indian business was also emphasised by Rama, the sole trader (Company 4):

"None of them [Indian business links] are my relations and I had to fight through that. India is a very difficult place to trade with and once they know you are a foreigner and a woman at that it's very hard. Unless they have lived in the West and travelled in the West and they know what women are doing in the West." (Rama Company 4.)

Rama (Company 4) went on to say:

"I find dealing with the majority of Asian men, there is a lot of arrogance, I can deal with that, but it's the ethical side. I have very strong principles and don't like people saying one thing and six months later changing that." (Rama Company 4.)

The Belgrave Road/Melton Road retail complex

Retail activities in the Belgrave area have grown remarkably, and it is now one of the most dynamic South Asian retail centres in the country. Along Belgrave Road/Melton Road -- a site of consumption beyond the mall and the department store -- are food and clothing retailers and restaurants, as well as high status jewellers and clothing retailers,¹² the latter's market being defined by social class rather than ethnicity (Hardill and Raghuram 1998). The road is:

¹²Kala (Company 2) said, "we cater for an exclusive market, bridal trousseaux, one-offs so that the clientele feel that on their wedding day they have something different. I also sell ready-made salwaar kameezs, 12 pieces per design I have about 20-25 different designers I work with." Indira (Company 3) described her shop as, "an exclusive boutique." I have elsewhere explored the growth of this market (Hardill and Raghuram 1998).

“one of the most striking retail and service thoroughfares in Britain ... alongside these highly visible components is the equally important ... intense family and social interaction, which is a feature and strength of Belgrave and Leicester’s Asian community.” (Nash and Reeder 1993, 191.)

The Belgrave Road/Melton Road along with other retail centres such as Green Road, Newham (Roy 1997, 56) have a far greater range of retail activities than most other South Asian retail centres, such as Normanton Road, Derby.¹³ It is only in the higher order retail centres that specialist retailers, such as exclusive clothing retailers and jewellers are located. The higher order centres, however, began by serving their local South Asian community. As the residents of Belgrave - the East African Asian migrants - were predisposed to self employment (see above) they therefore provided the retail outlets with a dynamic local market base. South Asian retailing thus appears to add a further dimension to the polarised nature of contemporary retailing beyond the mall and the department store (Crewe and Forster 1993, 264; Lowe and Wrigley 1996).

The Belgrave Road/Melton Road retail centre thus benefited from the growing levels of purchasing power of the local population. The second generation East African Asians have entered the professions (Metcalf et al. 1996). This trend is illustrated by the families of the interviewees. Malini (Company 1) said:

“One sister is a social worker, one is a computer person. I did my degree in Sheffield and postgrad. at Nottingham, I was a consultant.”

Kala (Company 2) said:

“I have nine ‘O’ levels and three ‘A’ levels. I did a degree in Environmental Chemistry. I got married straight after my degree but was working as Home Schools Liaison Officer for about one and a half years. My elder brother is a dentist. My parents had a newsagents.”

The emergence of a service class has been accompanied by a dispersal of the East African Asian population from the Belgrave area to suburban areas, such as Rushey Mead¹⁴ and semi-rural locations around Leicester, but they still shop for Asian produce along Belgrave Road/Melton Road. Malini said:

“Leicester is incredibly wealthy, it’s full of incredibly wealthy Asians ... big massive houses with swimming pools ... all owned by Asians.” (Malini Company 1.)

¹³ One reason identified by a minority ethnic business adviser in Derby, is the local Asian population in Derby, which largely consists of direct migrants from rural Pakistan (Raithatha, personal communication).

¹⁴ In 1991, Rushey Mead, to the north of Belgrave ward emerged as the numerically most important ward for East African Asian residents accounting for 20 per cent of the ward population, while in Belgrave ward the proportion declined to 13.9 per cent (1478) (Rooney and O’Connor 1995, 24).

The South Asian middle class minority is thus drawn from the business community and increasingly from the service class (doctors, solicitors, barristers, etc.) who together have transformed the nature of the local market for South Asian goods. When it comes to clothing for example, the middle class minority tend to wear western dress everyday, including for work and South Asian dress for social occasions and for leisure wear¹⁵.

The East African Asian women interviewees recognised this market, indeed they are part of it and are serving it (Hardill and Raghuram 1998). Rama (Company 4) said:

“It’s just in the last year or so that Asian people are looking at Asian cultures and traditions very strongly. There is a select market for things like that and mainly it was in the West.” (Rama Company 4.)

Customers are attracted not just from the East African Asian community of Belgrave or elsewhere in the city, but from much further afield to shop on Belgrave Road/Melton Road. The vast majority of their customers are South Asian:

“Our customers are 90 per cent Asian.” (Kala Company 2.)

Rama explained:

“I have had people from Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, London, they say they have never seen some of the things I have got, even in India. I have customers from Europe and South Africa ... through personal contacts.” (Rama Company 4.)

Malini also said:

“I am forever doing VAT forms, I think half of Malawi is coming to my shop.” (Malini Company 1.)

Malini went on to explain that there are ‘Malawi Muslims’ who live in Leicester:

“Down Narborough Road all those wholesalers and clothing wholesalers, they are all Malawi Muslims. With the Malawians if you have got one or two families in the community you get the whole lot. (Malini, Company 1.)

The Malawian Muslims of Leicester still have strong familial links with the community in Malawi, and both groups visit Malini’s shop.

When it comes to advertising, all the surveyed companies publicised their products in magazines and on television:

¹⁵Dress codes for their retail outlets were discussed in the interviews, and Malini (Company 1) for example said that it was only on a Saturday that she insisted that the shop assistants wear Asian dress.

“We are doing a shoot with [Asian satellite TV station] we used girls from an Asian model competition.” (Malini, Company 1.)

Another important way customers come to their shops is by personal recommendation:

“A lot of advertising is word of mouth with the clientele.” (Kala, Company 2.)

Shop location

As was revealed above, ‘place’ and networks of social relations have emerged to be of critical importance in the growth and diversification of retail functions on Belgrave Road/Melton Road. In order to explore the importance of place, the interviewees were asked why they had opened retail outlets there. One said:

“In this country there are only six major areas where you can retail Indian¹⁶ products effectively, and that’s obviously East London, Wembley, Southall, Birmingham, Leicester and Manchester ... everywhere else there are Indian areas but they are just too small, too many and all the other areas everyone travels. I mean England is not very big.” (Malini, Company 1.)

Malini’s company has two shops in London and one on Belgrave Road/Melton Road:

“We cover [have shops in] the three main areas ... [elsewhere] there is no point but we also distribute, we sell to somebody in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Bradford and Tooting, other shops come and buy from us. Nottingham is not ready for us at the moment.” (Company 1.)

Kala, Company 2, identified London and the Midlands cities of Birmingham and Coventry as the other places where the market is large enough to support the retailing of South Asian designer wear. Company 3 also has a retail unit in Birmingham. The companies want their retail outlets to be in cities where not only there is a large South Asian population, but one with a local population with high levels of purchasing power, and crucially where there is a cluster of other higher order retailers.

They wanted their shops located in a very specific places in these cities, where the other retail outlets are ‘successful’. It is important that their shops are associated and linked (spatially) to other exclusive retail outlets, such as jewellers and high status restaurants. Thus Malini (Company 1) when describing the location of her shop on Belgrave Road/Melton Road said:

¹⁶ This interviewee used ‘Indian’ while others used ‘Asian’ when describing their product or market. I have used whatever term the interviewee used, embracing the idea of ethnicity as a situational rather than an independent category.

“The middle part of Belgrave Road which is really blooming -- restaurants -- then there is [jewellery shop] down the middle, [where] you can't miss it.” (Company 1.)

Kala (Company 2), who has been in the business since 1984, said:

“In 1990 we moved here to this property ... we had the whole property done up to suit our trade. The move has made a tremendous difference. [Before] we weren't in the centre of the road ... now [we have] a prime location, with more display space.” (Kala Company 2.)

The mark-up is high in fashion retailing and the profits generated are also high, and therefore space is not a deterrent to the enterprise. Company 1's shop for instance, is designed with the feeling of space. In fact, space is an important part of the atmosphere of the shop:

“Our shops are massive, I mean 10,000 square feet.” (Malini, Company 1.)

Place has played a critical part in the development of these retail complexes. Places are significant as they are the focus of personal feelings (Rose 1995, 92). These higher-order South Asian retail centres are described as the “window for Indian fashion” (Roy 1997, 56). The nature and organisation of such retailing clusters are influenced by the, “space economies within which consumption goods are circulating” (Glennie and Thrift 1992, 431). The economic benefits of these centres are being increasingly recognised by local authorities (Leicester City Council 1994; Roy 1997). Parallel developments have been observed amongst the Overseas Chinese community in France and in Great Britain (MaMung 1995).

Diasporic business connections

Diasporic connections with India and elsewhere in the South Asian diaspora are vital to the functioning of these businesses. Links with India are at the heart of each of the surveyed businesses, but power and decision making for the filière rests with the East African Asian women in Leicester, none of whom have direct familial links with India. All four women make regular business trips to India, where they are very involved in decision making, such as choosing materials. The sheer scale of these links is revealed by Kala (Company 2):

“About 80 per cent of our supplies are from India with about 20 per cent imported directly from Japan. These are Japanese saris designed by my husband.” (Company 2.)

All Rama's supplies are from India (Company 4):

“I physically go to India, all over the north and the south, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Delhi, Bombay. I buy my own fabrics, I get embroiders to embroider what I want them to do.” (Rama, Company 4.)

A common theme to emerge from recent studies of clothing and food consumption is the pivotal role played by the retailer (Crewe 1996; Crewe and Lowe 1996; Foord et al. 1996), and the East African Asian women interviewees are no exception. Malini explained the organisation of the filière and her pivotal role:

“We do the specs. in this country. I work closely with ... a designer. We do all our design specs and get the fabric samples here and put everything together here and then it goes out [to India] as a sample, and then it comes back [to Leicester] and then goes into production [in India].” (Company 1.)

In all the surveyed companies the interviewees were instrumental in designing their products and having them made in India. But for the filière to work effectively business connections must be good with India. Since Kala (Company 2) entered the retail side of the family business in 1984, which she now has sole charge of, it has been transformed by her decision to cater for new exclusive markets. In her interview she acknowledged that this could not have taken place without good suppliers in India:

“The major support we had was from our suppliers in India [Bombay] ... they have been a major source of moral and financial support, all kinds of support really. Giving us ideas of all the new fashions that are available, giving us contact to other people. My in-laws used them in Zambia, then even here. So it was a relation more than just a business relationship, it was more a family relation in that sense.” (Company 2.)

The Bombay agents thus play a pivotal role in Kala's new business venture:

“With Asian weddings there are five or six occasions. So you want a different style of outfit for each event. My job is to show the new material, kinds of embroideries and new styles that we can work out what would suit the bride herself. It takes about three months then to manufacture in India. I take the designs to India and sit with designers there. Other times if [there are] time constraints or whatever then I can talk with them on the fax and sort it out with our suppliers in Bombay and then they give it to the designers.” (Company 2.)

Kala thus works closely with their Bombay suppliers to meet the very lucrative bridal orders.

Company 1 now has an office in India but uses subcontract cut-make-and-trim (CMT) units in India. Although the nature of their relationship with their major subcontractor is more of a partnership, as Malini describes:

“We thought it was better to set up with somebody so that literally it's a new person that is skilled but didn't have the finance to set up themselves. So we work with them to set them up and so they will stay loyal, and vice-versa really. We stay loyal to their production and they stay loyal to us. It works both ways.” (Company 1.)

There appears to be strong parallels with the type of business relationships described amongst the overseas Chinese (MaMung 1995; Thrift and Olds 1996).

The liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1992 has changed the nature of diasporic connections as Malini explained. Company 1 since 1995:

“... has an export company based in India. It is a British company but based in India. Until 1995 you had to have somebody who was living in India who was a partner in the Company, but since it became an open market outside investors can open up a company, so we opened ... [x] ... which does solely exports.” (Company 1.)

They use this company to organise production in India but also to export directly from India to other parts of the diaspora:

“We export from India to other places ... we do our own production and our own label so what we do is export to Mauritius, South Africa and America, its better to do direct rather than going by Great Britain because the duties are too high in Great Britain.” (Company 1.)

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to focus on transnational capital and minority enterprises in a South Asian business district through the lens of gender, which is sometimes a neglected variable in economic geography (Barnes 1996). In two and a half decades the Belgrave area of Leicester has been transformed by the spirit of enterprise of members of the East African Asian community, many of whom arrived as refugees. An area of the city that was suffering depopulation and factory closures has been created into a space of dynamism and enterprise, an activity space with a difference (Massey 1995), but a space which is strongly patriarchal. However, East African Asian women in the surveyed companies do occupy key managerial roles in the companies, either as entrepreneurs in their own right or as partners in family businesses. In three of the companies East African Asian males (often using female labour or women as ‘hidden’ partners) shaped the nature of the businesses until the 1990s, and business activities were not confined to just garment retailing.

Diasporic business connections are producing a social space with a difference. The power and decision making relating to one emerging retail activity -- exclusive designer wear and leisure wear -- along Belgrave Road/Melton Road is today being made by East African Asian women. None of these women were born in India, yet they have used their knowledge and social networks to serve a new retail market which cuts across ethnic and class boundaries. In this study strong parallels have emerged with businesses within the South Asian diaspora and amongst the Overseas Chinese (Thrift and Olds 1996 325). Capitalism in both

communities is anchored around networks of family firms and the male head of household plays a key role in defining strategy from the smallest firm to the largest transnational conglomerate. But within the South Asian diaspora, East African Asian women -- married and single -- are playing an increasingly pivotal role in identifying and serving a market defined by class, which cuts across the many communities who comprise the South Asian diaspora.

The concept of place is described as “one of the most theoretically and politically pressing issues facing us today” (Rose 1995, 88). It is argued that ideas of places are socially constructed; spatial movement, as an example of the changing social organisation of *space*, has disrupted our existing forms of, and concept of place (Massey 1995, 54). For Allen and Hamnett (1995) *social space* is formed out of ‘stretched out’ social relations. Massey (1995a) suggests that one way of approaching this systematically is to think in terms of the *activity spaces* of different phenomena. Activity spaces in a heuristic sense helps us with a particular way of thinking about the spatial organisation of society. South Asian diasporic business connections are one articulation of social space and activity space with a difference. ‘Home’ is a space of production, but power and decision making regarding what is produced, where it is manufactured and where the finished products are retailed lies with women in the Belgrave district of Leicester, the heart of the activity space for Asian designer and leisure wear.

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