

Birmingham

Birmingham has been described as a mongrel city, created by immigrants, a melting pot of communities. The city's character is in its people. The world can be seen in the cultural diversity and variety of the people of Birmingham. Birmingham is a notable unique package of the commodified experience of "community". In particular the ethnic enclaves formed by migrant/minority groups who see an affinity and citizenship to Birmingham globalising the city and returning it to its once famed title of being the centre of the world. Birmingham's ethnic mix makes it an "exotic" location where the local and global intersect.

Birmingham is re-inventing itself through a strategy of prestige city centre regeneration. The city of Birmingham is constructing its economic place in the world once again. The city's response has been massive investment in service industries, and especially business tourism, mainly delivered through the strategy of prestige city centre. Examples include the International Convention Centre (ICC) and Symphony Hall, Brindley Place (a major leisure development of clubs, pubs, restaurants, shops, offices and luxury housing in the old canal basin), the National Indoor Arena (NIA), the National Exhibition Centre (NEC), Mailbox, Millennium Point, the Bull Ring and Arena Central. In short, Birmingham has been reinventing itself, and its place in the contemporary global economy, assisted by new shopping centres, hotel and leisure complexes, the hosting of international conventions (such as the Eurovision Song Contest and the G8 Summit) and marketing campaigns promoting the city as the 'Meeting Place of Europe'.

Not surprisingly, such a re-invention has been subject to (an increasingly familiar) critique. It is argued that prestige-based top-down, inward investment regeneration schemes are accused of playing to 'global city' imaginaries that produce cities with even greater levels of economic and social polarisation. In the case of Birmingham, it is argued that prestige development has failed to provide enough well-paid jobs, that city finances have been diverted from other sectors (such as education and housing) to pay for these projects, and there have been the inevitable questions about the exclusivity of, and access to, the spaces created. Moreover, the homogenisation tendencies of prestige regeneration have been commented upon as part of an emergent critique concerning the formulaic nature of much redevelopment and its failure to reflect the full diversity and difference to be found amongst the residential population of the city.

Multicultural city, multicultural economy?

An alternative strategy based on 'globalisation from below', involving the range of economic networks and commodities associated with the multicultural residential communities of the city. Birmingham is potentially a working example of multicultural economic development.

“From music to dress, from the novel to film, London [Birmingham/any UK city] is being transformed, and ethnicity is central to much of what is happening (Jacques 1997)...Birmingham - the second largest city in the country - whose future will depend on the immigrants who have made it their home (*The Economist* 8 August 1998)”

Drawing from these critiques, and from debates on multiculturalism, there is a re-vision of Birmingham’s contemporary economic place in the world; it provides one alternative based on the distinctiveness of an economy rooted in multiculturalism. Birmingham as a ‘global’ city by taking a rather different angle by focusing on ‘ethnic diversity’, and the subsequent distinctiveness of the city’s economy. It highlights a bottom-up notion of globalisation that draws on the city’s residents and their histories. Moreover, it proposes a bottom-up notion of economic globalisation and argues that this is already producing signs of competitive success both for the city and its residents, including some of those groups excluded from both historical and contemporary constructions of Birmingham as a city. Signal a rather different understanding of ‘global’ as it relates to both economic advantage and ethnic diversity within cities in general, and within Birmingham in particular.

The diversity and significance of minority ethnic economic activity within Birmingham, and the potential this holds for future economic development in the city. Birmingham can be a working example of multicultural economic development. Through the encouragement of a more relational way of thinking about cities like Birmingham, a strategy which also has the potential for advancing social wellbeing by influencing socio-economic policy and practice. Birmingham has the potential to become economically regenerated through alternative paths of ‘global’, social and cultural investment. Multiculturalism can mean wealth creation of the utmost significance.

Bhangra Industry

As Birmingham is a locus of ethnic community-based economic networks, then a rather different picture of economic life in the city can be drawn. Birmingham’s economic position can be viewed as constructed through, and interwoven with, *numerous* ethnic networks, some more visible than others. In addition to the overseas Chinese there are other economic networks in the city that can be identified through their association with minority ethnicity. The areas of Sparkbrook and Sparkhill, for example, include Pakistani banks operating within the usury laws of Islam. The formation of Britain’s first Irish Business Association in Birmingham is another example of how some of Birmingham’s economic networks are being identified primarily by their ethnicity. Although ‘white’ business groups do not usually identify themselves in racialised terms, the Irish business community in Birmingham is unique in that it is constructing an ethnic identity based on ‘minority white’ experiences. It is explicit about “Irishness” and

economic advantage, and includes any business of Irish origin or with trading or cultural links with Ireland.

Another entry point into Birmingham's ethnicity-based economic networks is through looking at particular *commodities* that have become associated with (minority) ethnicity. For example, one commodity attracting attention at the moment is British Bhangra music, a product based on the fusion of Asian (specifically Punjabi), western and broader styles of music (such as ragga, reggae, soul, jazz funk, rock, hip-hop, pop).

Bhangra has come a long way in the 21st Century and has recently taken the entertainment industry by storm. In the 1970s and 1980s, many Punjabi singers from Southeast Asia and the United Kingdom emerged, setting the stage for Bhangra to become a hot new trend in dance music. Modern Bhangra artists, in addition to recording and performing traditional Bhangra, have also fused Bhangra with other music genres, such as hip-hop, reggae, house, and drum-and-bass.

It was not until the early eighties that Bhangra moved from "secluded halls and venues to the bright lights of the clubs and cities of England." First generation Asians were intrigued by their musical heritage, and helped bring Bhangra to the mainstream in their new country.

Bhangra took massive steps toward mainstream credibility in the 1990s, especially among youths. At the beginning of the nineties, many artists returned to the original, folk beats of Bhangra, often incorporating more dhol drum beats and tumbi. This time also saw the rise of several young Punjabi bands and DJs. Bhangra music has been remixed with house, reggae, and hip-hop to add a different flavour and these remixes continued to gain popularity as the nineties came to an end. During this time the popularity of Bhangra music has also spawned new genres of music and style such as The Asian Underground.

Beginning as a form of lively folk music performed at harvests in the Punjab, Bhangra has evolved remarkably over the past five hundred years. The music now fully represents the culture of the Punjab region, and the struggles of its people in their long and storied history. Moreover, the music still evolves today, incorporating elements of many different kinds of music from around the world, while still existing in its traditional form. Thanks to this diversification, Bhangra now reaches a larger audience than ever, all over the world, and we can easily expect Bhangra to continue its movement into mainstream culture well into the 21st Century.

This is now so popular within Birmingham that the city is recognised as the centre for Bhangra music in Britain. Although this music genre is enjoyed by numerous British South Asians in other cities (especially London), Birmingham is by far the cultural capital for Bhangra music. This can be seen in terms of the

large number of bands in the city, several recording and distribution companies (such as Oriental Star Agency on Moseley Road, Nachural records at Ladypool Road, Roma Music Bank in Handsworth), the steady production of new albums, and the growing number of live DJs.

Local entrepreneurs such as Oriental Star seized the opportunity to produce - rather than import - bhangra music. Tapes and records by local bands - Bhujangy and Anari Sangeet amongst others - found a thriving market through a network of high street electronics shops across the country. Initially, Handsworth bhangra musicians were enthusiastic amateurs. They strove to integrate European instruments into the music they played. They were the first generation of Punjabis to grow up in the UK who succeeded in this: Chirag Pehchan and other bands worked guitars and keyboards smoothly into their sound.

By the early 1980s, British Asians were a confident visible community in Handsworth, and bhangra made them an audible one too. With an implicit understanding of Western popular music forms, the next generation of bands such as DCS, Pardesi and Achanak provided the soundtrack to college life - at the 'daytimers' (clubbing during the day) and other events which became an expression of cultural identity by British Asian youth.

In the 1990s, it was the accessible blend of musical cultures around the Soho Road that inspired Apache Indian to make music which crossed over to mainstream UK audiences for the first time. Now in the 21st century, bhangra has found worldwide audience as samples in the music of Timbaland, Dr. Dre and others.

This collection of artists, musical talent and expertise, as well as the increasing live performance of British Bhangra at gigs, private celebratory parties and international recognition and success, helps to constitute a unique form of cultural production and music industry. Birmingham-based Apache Indian was the first South Asian British musician to break into the mainstream British charts in 1993, and he is now an international star. His music epitomises the hybrid nature of the fusion musical scene in Birmingham. Apache's music is a crossroads; a meeting place where the languages and rhythms of the Caribbean, North America and India intermingle in the context of Europe. Apache himself was raised in the multi-ethnic area of Handsworth, Birmingham, born of Hindu Punjabi parents. He performs and expresses himself through snatches of Jamaican patois, Punjabi and a culturally diverse vernacular English.

Conclusion

The evidence reveals a picture of economic activities drawing on diasporic networks, both local and global, to create unique and highly competitive products and services. These are not examples of unique ethnic entrepreneurialism but networks of increasingly *business as usual* enterprises in Birmingham. This is not 'third world comes to first' through ethnic entrepreneurial sweatshops; rather these economic activities should be framed within the literatures of economic

geography concerned with 'new industrial spaces' and 'networks', and the production of new hybrid products, with very different geographies.

Bhangra industry has the potential of being the city's next revolutionising industry such as the more widely celebrated success of the 'Birmingham balti'. Birmingham and the West Midlands region is now world famous for its balti which, like Bhangra music, is a hybrid product of British Asian cultures. There are endless arguments as to whether or not this product is 'authentic' to the West Midlands, Birmingham or the Punjab. What *is* significant is the fact that it is identified with a particular set of migrants to, and residents of, Birmingham and its region. These migrants have redefined this traditional dish into something unique which combines their ethnic roots with living in a Western city called Birmingham.

Recommendations

Birmingham has to become recognised as the international centre for the Bhangra, similar to Bollywood and Hollywood are to film. If a resident of Punjab, India is considering a career in Bhangra they should think Birmingham. This can be achieved through investment:

- Financial investment and support of businesses
- Infrastructural investment establishing in which the components of the industry are based
- DTI export support international market place
- Licensing regulations to ensure realistic costing and market value
- Establishing opportunities for big record labels to move to Birmingham keeping the talent in Birmingham
- Creating training centres and links within education establishments