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978-0-521-14124-6 - Migrants and Refugees: Muslim and Christian Pakistani families in Bristol

Patricia Jeffery

Excerpt

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Introduction

Over the last fifteen years, coloured immigration into Britain has frequently been in the forefront of the news, but all too often the material on this subject has been both anchored in the present and essentially ethnocentric. This book is about a small number of Pakistani families living in Britain, but it is impossible to understand their position without a consideration of the wider context within which their actions are set.

On occasion, Britain's colonial past is referred to in discussions of the growth of hostile and unflattering racial stereotypes: the slave trade, plantation economies, and colonial rule are argued to be intimately connected with the development of numerous 'racial classifications' (usually placing the white or Aryan at the apex of the species of man) during the nineteenth century, which are still held widely by people in Britain. But the crucial structural and economic impact of colonialism on both Britain and her colonies is rarely traced out. I do not have the space (nor the expertise) to deal properly with four hundred years of European economic history. However, I consider that it is vital that international migration is seen with the backdrop of colonialism clearly in view. 'Expanding Europe' penetrated the farthest corners of the world to control markets for valued imports to its own countries, and later monopolized certain areas of the world as outlets for its own manufactures. Predatory activities of colonists, latter-day ones as well as those in previous centuries, have left a world divided between the rich and industrialized nations and the poor countries of the Third World, which are characterized by food shortages, malnourished populations, enormous rates of un- and under-employment and few jobs in manufacturing industries. Even today, the countries of the Third World are still the sources of raw materials (crops, minerals) which the industrial world processes. Most of the coloured people in Britain come from countries affected in these ways by Britain.

The Indian sub-continent is one such area, often called the Brightest Jewel in the British Crown, and not without reason. Britain profited greatly from her relationship with India: the depredations which almost bankrupted Bengal in the 1760s, the remittances of the East India Company servants, the sordid opium trade from Bengal to China, the collection of land revenues in the tradition of the Mughals, the gradual

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destruction of a flourishing textile industry by cheaper Lancashire imports and restrictions on the export of Indian textiles to Britain, and the use of native soldiers to fight Britain's colonial wars elsewhere – all are critical (if rarely publicized) benefits which Britain brought out of India. India received the very dubious benefit of 'civilization' and the very obvious damage which comes from the siphoning-off of resources and living under foreign rule. That Britain is an industrial nation and that the countries of the Indian sub-continent have poor, basically agricultural economies are not unconnected facts of history. British control of Indian markets is one of the important factors behind the development of the industrial revolution in Britain. This control also had an important and destructive impact on manufacturing industries in India. Yet how rarely are allusions made to the irony of Indians' and Pakistanis' working in textile mills in Lancashire and Yorkshire, or in jute mills in Dundee.

The destinies of the Indian sub-continent and of Britain have long been intertwined, and we should not be surprised that Indians and Pakistanis in search of work should have looked to Britain, which was itself in search of cheap labour to man industries where wages were too unattractive to appeal to British people. Having siphoned-off natural resources, we now siphon-off man-power when we consider it to be in our interests. Until 1962, people from the Indian sub-continent could enter Britain freely, but now we are only willing to take in skilled workers (such as doctors) which their countries can ill afford to lose, and we exclude those who have little education or training, complacent about the fate to which we relegate them in their own country: unemployment and poverty. Only one of my informants, a young Christian woman, saw herself within this long-term perspective: she gleefully reported to me how she had responded to being asked why 'you people come to our country' by saying that they came to retrieve the *Koh-i-noor* diamond!¹ My other informants were unaware of the wider historical and structural aspects of their migration: they saw themselves as individuals living in a poor country and unable to provide properly for their families, who tried to make the best of the chances which life presented to them. In the account which follows, I have tried to withdraw myself as much as possible, and present a picture of the world as my informants see it: that they have not been made aware of the historical implications of their migration does not make those facets of the situation irrelevant. While they do not obtrude themselves in what follows, they must be borne in mind in any analysis of international migration today.

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Not only have I accused much of the writing on race relations in Britain of being apparently unaware of (or unwilling to make explicit) the historical dimensions of immigration from the New Commonwealth, but I have also suggested that much of it is ethnocentric. By this I do not mean simply that the response of British people has been hostile and even explicitly racist in tone. Certainly a great deal of antagonism and intolerance of people physically and culturally different have evidenced themselves: the 'tradition of tolerance' which we are so proud of in Britain is in reality shallow and fraudulent. Ethnocentrism is certainly present in this form, but even in serious reports on the coloured population in Britain it is all too common to find an ethnocentrism of another sort.

By this I mean that the geographical base in Britain is assumed to be important, and there is little attempt to take seriously the links which extend outside Britain to the sending country. In what follows, I shall place a great deal of emphasis on these links, for they are important to my informants as well as having analytical relevance. Firstly, migrants are likely to retain cultural links with their place of origin. Adult migrants do not arrive in Britain *tabulae rasae*; they have been socialized in Pakistan, and they bring to Britain evaluations, perceptions, memories and predispositions which have to be borne in mind when considering their behaviour in Britain. Secondly, many of them retain important social and economic links with their place of origin. Social relationships can persist over large distances, and the obligations which kin have to one another are often expected to persist after the separation which migration brings. Moreover, as will be seen, many links which could be established in Britain are not.

In addition, many of the migrants maintain important economic links with their homes: in many Third World countries remittances from nationals overseas make a vital contribution to their economies, and many families who are unable to make a living in their own country depend on money sent from members who have gone abroad in search of work. Pakistan is one such country, and migrants in Britain often send substantial sums of money to their homes, for the use of themselves or their relatives. In answer to those who complain of the removal of earnings to Pakistan, I would suggest that the colonial past be taken into account: Britain remitted enormous sums of money from the Indian sub-continent in one form or another, and current aid and trading relationships perpetuate this drain: work is scarce in Pakistan, and the remittances of migrants overseas represent the legitimate desire of

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people to provide a livelihood for their families. Mahbub ul Haq puts it this way:

I argued from the experience of India and Pakistan that, when we were associated with Britain in a partnership in the nineteenth century and the British had this slight problem about financing their industrial revolution and their structural transformation, we willingly brought out our gold and our diamonds and our agricultural produce for nominal prices and told them to go ahead and not lose the opportunity for a technological breakthrough. We cheerfully stayed on as an agrarian economy and applauded the industrial strides of our partner. In the modern terminology, such a thing will be called a transfer of resources, but the world was such a happy community at that time that we never even dreamed of such terms or asked for performance audits.

Mr. Polanski, unreasonable as he is, wanted to know the magnitude of the transfer and I mentioned an off-the-cuff figure of \$100 million – a modest estimate for which I may be disowned by my fellow economists in the sub-continent . . . I argued that this amount could be treated as a voluntary loan, at 6% interest, which has been multiplying happily over the years so that it stands at \$410 million today.²

Remittances from Pakistanis abroad are a mere drop in the ocean, and are a tiny contribution to redressing the balance of British imperialism in India, even though they are very important at an individual level. That they are so critical to the economy of Pakistan is a reflection of the low earning power of her resources and the small sums she can earn from the export of manufactures. The economic ties which the migrants have with their place of origin have a bearing on the way they see themselves in Britain: as will be seen, for some of them there is a considerable discrepancy between their objective class position in Britain and their subjective position. Here again, the links which go beyond Britain have to be considered, for many of them are rating themselves within the status system at home, and are hoping that they will return there when they have been able to save enough to permit them to live respectably in Pakistan. It would be inhumane to see this desire as support for a policy of repatriation, for many would be unable to survive if they were sent back, and for many the desire to return is probably no more than a useful myth. Investment of savings in Pakistan and talk of returning nevertheless have an important bearing on their life in Britain.

On all these counts, the analysis has to step outside the confines of

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Britain, and include the other end of the migration: any analysis which does not incorporate the important links between both ends of the migration situation will be impoverished. All social research has problems of trying to put boundaries on the social systems which are being studied in order that the exercise may be feasible. It is critical, though, that the delimitation of the unit for study does not lead to the misconstruction of the social processes within it, and I would argue that this is a serious danger if the geographical base in Britain is assumed to be a suitable unit for the analysis of the responses of migrants and of their position in Britain.

This report is a revised and abridged version of a Ph.D. thesis submitted at Bristol University in 1973.³ It is the result of fieldwork conducted in Bristol and Pakistan during 1970 and 1971. When I began the research, I had intended to focus on adolescent Pakistani girls, particularly with respect to their parents' wishes to maintain *purdah* in Britain and to arrange the marriages of their children. I soon realized, however, that there were few conflicts between the girls and their parents, and I was very much struck with the ways in which the migrants were able to maintain a 'Pakistani' identity. I decided to shift the concern of the research and focus much more on the ways in which certain elements of the migrants' culture can be protected and how children may be brought up in a Pakistani domestic setting in Britain. In other words, I began to focus on the social processes involved in non-assimilation and the maintenance of ethnic boundaries. I made contact with informants through informal introductions, and was fortunate to be introduced to some Christian Pakistanis, as they act as useful foils to the Muslims. I go into the details of the fieldwork in Chapter 3. As a woman, I had special advantages over a man in looking at the home-lives of my informants, and it is on these private aspects of their lives that this report concentrates. These are the parts of their lives over which they have most control in the choice of activities and associates. At the moment, the adult migrants regard their work instrumentally, but it is too early to know yet how their children will react to the opportunities presented to them in Britain.

As will be seen, the Muslim and Christian informants come from urban backgrounds, and they were not involved in agricultural work in Pakistan; thus they cannot be said to be representative of Pakistanis as a whole, and this raises problems of generalizability from this research. On the other hand, other reports on Pakistanis in Britain, and indeed on Indians too, suggest that there are several parallels with the Muslim

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informants, even though they come from a rather unusual background.⁴

As will be seen later, the Christians stand apart from the more general picture.

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I. The background: Pakistan

1.0 Introduction

A central proposition of this book is that it is not possible to understand the behaviour and aspirations of my informants in Bristol without a close consideration of their life-styles and life-chances in Pakistan. This first chapter looks at various issues concerning Pakistan which are of particular relevance to the later chapters.

1.1 Islam in the Indian sub-continent¹

Islam has a long history in India. Muslim traders are thought to have arrived near present-day Karachi in the first century after Mohammed, and Sind was under Arab rule early in the eighth century A.D. Thereafter most Muslim influence came overland from Turkestan, Afghanistan and Persia, and much of north India was under Muslim rule for several centuries. The Mughal dynasty was the most famous and last of the immigrant Muslim dynasties. Between 1525 (when Babur invaded 'Hindustan') and 1707 (when Aurangzeb died), the Mughals were more or less supreme over north India, and for a time their kingdom stretched into the Deccan, carrying with it an Islamic influence. After 1707, Mughal power declined: Aurangzeb left seventeen potential candidates for the throne and the internecine struggles left the Mughal Empire vulnerable to the growing power of the Marathas and the Sikhs, and invasions from Afghanistan and Persia during the eighteenth century. Already, the British East India Company had a base in Calcutta and in 1698 had been granted the right to collect the Emperor's share of revenue in Calcutta and the surrounding villages. During the following century, the Company gained supremacy over the other European trading concerns and took advantage of the power vacuum in north India. In 1803, the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam was taken into British protection and a British Resident in Delhi supervised his affairs. Bahadur Shah (the last Mughal Emperor) was exiled to Burma after being used as a figure-head in the Sepoy Revolt in 1857, and after that, except in some princely states, Muslim rule was replaced by British.

By this time, many people in north India were Muslim. Some undoubtedly were the descendants of men who had come to India with the

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Muslim conquerors, but there are also reports of voluntary mass conversions from Hinduism. It is not possible to assess the relative numbers coming from these two sources, as converts often took on respectable Muslim names (such as Sheikh and Ashraf) which imply immigrant origins. Islam is thought to have spread in India largely because it offered better social status, especially to the members of low castes. Today Bengal and some parts of Punjab are the areas of highest Muslim concentration, while the middle Ganges lowlands and central India have predominantly Hindu populations, despite being under Muslim rule for over five hundred years. Tayyeb suggests that Punjab and Bengal were left with 'low caste' and Muslim populations after people of 'high caste' had evacuated to the central areas which were less vulnerable to invasion. This is not a satisfactory interpretation, however, and given the dearth of historical material, it remains unclear why the Muslim and Hindu populations are distributed in the way they are in north India.²

During Muslim rule, reference was constantly made back to Persia and Arabia in architecture, poetry and painting as well as in religious matters, and as a result many Muslims in India retained a certain aloofness from Indian traditions. Nevertheless, Islam in India has incorporated many Indian customs through its converts, and it is distinguishable from Islam in other parts of the world.

For more detailed accounts of Islam, I refer the reader to several sources.³ Islam arose largely as a revolt against idolatry and social injustice. Its central precept is the unity of Allah, and 'islam' means submission to his will: a 'muslim' is one who has subjected himself to God. ('Islam' and 'Muslim' come from the same Arabic root: *s-l-m*.) God gave man many gifts, including the ability to discriminate between good and evil, but man forgot the gifts and God sent messengers or prophets to put man back on the right course. The prophethood included Abraham (*Hazrat Ibrahim*) and Christ (*Hazrat Isa*) and was ended with Mohammed, who preached that only God is worthy of worship, that all men are equal and brothers and that only the good man will be rewarded in the after-life. The Koran Sherif contains the definitive account of God's ordinances, though Jewish and early Christian writings are also revered. There are commentaries on the preachings of Mohammed, and the *hadith* (the accounts of the doings of Mohammed) are used as authority in legal decisions. Islamic law is not enforced by a church or organized priesthood. There are several schools of Islamic jurisprudence, and two major divisions to which the laity belong: Sunnis constitute about 90 per cent of the Muslims in Pakistan, while Shias

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(Shiites) make up most of the remaining 10 per cent.⁴ Sunnis and Shias worship at different mosques. The differences between them focus on the succession to the Caliphate in the early days of Islam: briefly, the Shias considered that the Caliphate should go to the descendants of the prophet, while the Sunnis believed that it should be awarded on merit. All my Muslim informants were Sunni.

Islam has five 'pillars'. Three are supposedly compulsory and are the confession of faith or *kalimah* (*la ilaha illallah Mohammed rasulallah*, meaning 'there is no god but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet'); *namaz* (prayer, which should be performed five times a day at specified times after the requisite ablutions) and *roza* (fasting, in particular the complete abstinence from eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual intercourse between sunrise and sunset during the month of *Ramzan*). The two remaining pillars are compulsory only for those with means and are *haj* (pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of *Zulhaj*) and *zukat* (tithes for public works and sustenance of the poor, levied at various rates for cash, gold and silver). It is important to bear in mind that Islam does not portion life into 'religious' and 'secular' aspects. Many Muslim theologians argue that Islam provides a blueprint for the organization of society and covers economic, political and family relationships just as much as it decrees how Allah should be worshipped through prayer. Thus, over and above the five central duties of Muslims, Islamic doctrine specifies desirable behaviour in other areas.

One such field relates to domestic matters, in particular to the position of men and women in an Islamic society and the importance of marriage and family life. There is spiritual equality between the sexes, and religious and secular duties are the same for men and women. At the same time, however, men and women have special aptitudes and therefore special responsibilities. The primary and essential vocation of women is motherhood, and men are suited for activity in the political and economic spheres. Stable family life is essential for the stability of society and marriage is incumbent on Muslims. Marriage is a civil contract; both parties may write terms into the contract and are required to give their consent. Marriages may be dissolved, but there are checks to prevent divorce becoming too prevalent. Either party may initiate divorce proceedings, though it is more difficult for the woman. Stable family life is crucial and several injunctions are designed to preserve it. Women are discouraged from taking on activities outside the home, so that they do not neglect their domestic duties. In public, men and women are supposed to behave in certain ways so that they are not

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tempted into marital infidelity. People should be modest and cast their eyes down in mixed company, and the body should be well covered so that men and women do not draw attention to one another. Many commentators say that women should only leave the home when absolutely necessary, to prevent them from falling into temptation and also to facilitate the dutiful fulfilment of their womanly tasks. In Pakistan, very few women work outside the home, and girls tend to receive less schooling than boys.

Some Muslim men have more than one wife, but in fact there is a religious debate about the permissibility of polygamy for Muslims. Some theologians argue that it is permissible for a man to have up to four wives at one time. Others point to a text in the Koran to the effect that a man should only take more than one wife if he can treat the co-wives equally: they argue that this is an implicit prohibition of polygamy. In the circles I knew, polygamy was very rare (I came across only two cases): most informants considered that to take on two wives was folly, and they held very negative stereotypes about the ways in which a woman would treat her co-wife and step-children.

There are several practices in Pakistani Islam which indicate the influence of Hinduism. For instance, until the Partition of India in 1947 there were many shrines which were used jointly by Muslims and Hindus. Since 1947, those shrines in Pakistan have continued to be patronized by Muslims. Often the shrine is the grave of a holy man and Allah may be approached through the dead man for the granting of favours such as the gift of sons or recovery from illness. This practice is contrary to one of the central tenets of Islam, that God should be approached directly by a believer and not through a mediator. There also seems to be widespread belief in various beings such as ghosts and demons which can influence a person's life: again these are not part of orthodox Islam.⁵

Local custom has also influenced the organization of marriages, in particular in the giving of dowries. According to Islam, a man should give his wife a sum of money when they marry (the *mahr-i-mithl*), which he forfeits if he initiates divorce and which she must return if she divorces him. The wife brings no property to the marriage until her parents die, when she is entitled to a share of their property (though a smaller share than goes to her brother). In Pakistan, it is rare for the *mahr* to be given, though a sum may be agreed, and eventually given if the man dies before his wife or divorces her. The bride's relatives, however, are expected to donate a dowry, which should include clothing, jewellery and