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Review Article

British Asian Jigsaw

Ellis Cashmore

Asifa Hussain and William Miller, **Multicultural Nationalism, Islamophobia, Anglophobia, and Devolution**

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 216pp., £50.00 hb (ISBN: 0-19-928071-1; 978-0-19-928071-1)

Muzammil Quraishi, **Muslims and Crime: A Comparative Study**

Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, 164pp., £45 hb (ISBN: 0-7546-4233X)

Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain, **The Role of Higher Education in Providing Opportunities for South Asian Women**

Bristol: The Policy Press, 2007, 56pp., £12.95 pb (ISBN: 9781861349736)

Satwant Kaur Rait, **Sikh Women in England: Their Religious and Cultural Beliefs and Social Practices**

Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 2005, 210pp., £19.99 pb (ISBN: 1-85856-353-4).

Sofia Chanda-Gool, **South Asian Communities: Catalysts for Educational Change**

Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 2006, 234pp., £15.99 (ISBN: 1-85856-382-8)

From Anomalous to Exemplary

Imagine it is 1965: you are asked which of Britain's two recently arrived migrant populations will integrate more readily. Your first reaction might be to review recent evidence. Caribbeans come from Christian backgrounds, speak English and are familiar with many British institutions, including an educational system they venerate. In this sense, they need no cultural street guide. The landscape for South Asians is unfamiliar, perhaps even forbidding. Many do not speak English, have no places of worship, or shops from where they can buy their favoured food. Some dress in ways that attract stares. They look set to become an anomalous presence.

You resume your accounting 20 years later and, to your surprise, a seemingly permanent underclass of unemployed Caribbeans is now, as lots of research indicates, trapped in a downward spiral of underachievement at school, followed by crime and imprisonment. The stability of the family appears under threat, Christianity is being

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challenged by the rise of Rastafari and *disintegration* looks likely. Brixton, Handsworth and other inner-city areas are ablaze, as young blacks serve notice of a crisis.

South Asians, meanwhile, have diffused into commerce, built their own places of worship, worked their way into higher education and are slowly, but cumulatively progressing into the professions. You have to reckon with a kind of Law of Rebounding Returns: every time they encounter a rebuff, Asians bounce back with renewed determination. While the achievers are held up as exemplary minorities, the lesser-achieving mortals draw scant approval, and even then only for their non-confrontational response to their predicament.

Another 20 years: evidence in 2005 further complicates matters. Britons of Indian descent vie with the much smaller Chinese population as the country's educational high-performing elite, while others, in particular Pakistanis and Bangladeshis (90 per cent of whom are Muslims), struggle in both education and in the desirable professions. There is talk of voluntary segregation, but for the most part British Asians, as they are now called, have ticked all the boxes of integration. Well, almost all of them: a bomb attack in London suggests a rage among some sectors of the population. It triggers retaliatory violence reminiscent of the 1970s, only this time called Islamophobia (though the violence seems to be directed to anyone who appears to be of Asian origin, regardless of faith). Arson raids on mosques and Asian-owned shops become commonplace, Imams are habitually assaulted and hate crimes against Asians contribute to a climate of perplexity and fear.

In the 1960s, you would be forgiven for thinking there was an Asian community. Evidence from places like Sparkbrook in Birmingham and London's Southall evoked images of dusk-till-dawn suffering amid overcrowded housing and underpaid work. Now, as the five books under review remind us, there is no community. Super-rich industrialists have little in common with Bangladeshi strugglers. Leeds' Sikhs do not share a sense of purpose with Bradford's Pakistanis or Bengalis in Tower Hamlets. Wahhabi Muslims avoid dealing with Hindus.

If there is any semblance of commonality, its source lies in the reaction from the other 58 million or so residents of Britain: being called a 'paki' as you drive home from surgery in your Lexus LS and hearing the same epithet shouted at one of your patients waiting in a bus queue brings about an empathy of sorts.

Despite 40-odd years of change, British Asians are still often regarded as a uniform group, rather than the diverse and variegated collection of people investigated in different ways by the books under review.

Traditional Priorities

Reading these books, I was prompted to think of the Asian experience as a jigsaw which only makes sense once the variously shaped pieces have been fitted together, but in which some of the pieces are so incompatible that they seem to be from a different puzzle entirely.

In Quraishi's study, we find British Muslims feeling victimised after 'becoming the subject of increased discriminatory policing, sentencing and negative media reporting'. This perception informs a self-understanding as a 'deviant' presence. Almost perversely, British Asian women who have progressed into higher education are also 'deviants', according to Bagguley and Hussain: 'Those within the wider [Asian] community who had not educated their daughters perceived their [educated women's] education as deviating from the norm.'

Comparable issues are found among Sikh women for whom the freedom enjoyed by their peers poses a threat, at least in their families' understanding: 'They [parents] do not wish to restrict their daughters' education but disapprove of sending them away from home to study and are still keen for daughters to marry before they are twenty-five', writes Kaur Rait.

For all the supposed emphasis Asian parents are thought to place on education, 'cultural and religious knowledge was a priority' for many of the families surveyed by Chanda-Gool. And this makes sense when we discover, through Hussain and Miller, that Muslims in general, and those of Pakistani descent in particular, regard their religion as their primary source of identity and one that supersedes being Scottish, British or Pakistani. Disaffected youth, aspirational achievers and conflicted brides are all parts of a polychromatic *montage* in which there are also surgeons and call-centre workers as well as the corner shopkeeper, who is not so much a stereotype as a model of diligent enterprise in an often hostile environment.

Multicultural Nationalism explains how 'vicarious experience' shapes awareness, suggesting that the 'world-wide conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims' affects the mindset of young people physically removed from the actual conflict—in Scotland. The so-called 'war on terror' is imagined as a war on Muslims in the eyes of some British Asians.

Reading between the lines of *Muslims and Crime*, we can understand how the global conflict provides a schema. Believing you are the victim of oppressive, prejudicial policing makes sense if you accept that you are part of an unjust exercise of force that forms a wider pattern. Some have suspected that the renewal of Muslim identity is the effect rather than the cause of conflict in Britain, though there is evidence in *South Asian British Communities* that forms of allegiance focused on place, nationality, class or profession 'can appear to lack an encompassing world-view and are impoverished ... Islam [is] clearly the most powerful and reaffirming element'.

Sikh Women in England also emphasises the abiding importance of religion, in this case to the eponymous group, many of whom are 'not against education but firmly believe that higher education makes girls too independent'. This is echoed in the Bagguley and Hussain study: religious mandates make higher education not just valueless—'there is no point because they are going to get married anyway and they are going to be a housewife'—but threatening. 'Allowing girls more freedom can risk family *izzat* (honour)', writes Kaur Rait in reference to older Asians' perspectives.

What becomes clear through Kaur Rait's uncritical but delicately observed ethnography is that, while Sikhs 'often come up against racism and prejudices', by far the most obdurate impediment to the development of young women is the very thing that, for years, many argued was a stabilising substructure: the family. 'It is not worth taking the risk of making your own choice for marriage and losing family support', one of Kaur Rait's subjects testifies.

So, when Kaur Rait concludes, 'The [family] system works well generally', the reader might wonder if the several accounts of spousal abuse, retarded education, separation of parents from children and loveless marriages qualify as aberrant exceptions. And when she writes, 'Many Sikh women still sacrifice their own interests for the sake of family respect', the question of how self-denial benefits British Asian women is left unanswered.

Can this form of coercion by parents and grandparents yield productive development? Should we blame the family? Or their prohibitive religions? Piety impairs maturation, expansion and progress and, in one way or another, all the authors evidence beliefs, practices and traditions that seem awkwardly and perhaps dangerously out of step. Not that any of them expresses disapproval of the reactionary impulses released by some forms of Sikhism or Islam. All are too respectful to criticise the phenomena they have documented. Yet the implications are transparently clear: British Asian women experience tensions as they seek to close the spaces between continents, and between generations.

Collectively, the books present a lavish and complex jigsaw. There is, however, a missing piece: while all but one of the titles was published after the London bomb attacks in summer 2005, none acknowledges nor even hints at its impact; less still tries to make it comprehensible.

Friends Who Are Also Enemies

At a different time in history, the behaviour of some young British Asians might be symptomatic of their estrangement from a society in which their access to education, political positions or high-ranking jobs was restricted by institutional racism. These would have been citable reasons in the 1980s, but not in the twenty-first century.

Taken together, the books reviewed advance a model of a society in which education and equal opportunity policies have taken some effect, though not in a way that promotes social inclusion among all parts. Policies have failed to reach some groups, while other groups have simply resisted them. Bagguley and Hussain's and Kaur Rait's work, for example, underlines how British Asian women are deterred from excelling in education. Hussain and Miller's research provides an inventory of grievances, chronicling how some British Asians experience difficulty, resulting in their personal discomfort and others see the glaring persecution expressed in a near-universal Islamophobia

Perhaps young British Muslims began to reflect on their own positions and those of their parents and elders who had been abused in the 1960s and 1970s by

'paki-bashing' young whites, ridiculed by comedians and often forced to make a living out of the corner shops with which they became inefaceably identified. Hussain and Miller's interviewees echo larger themes: once the most vulnerable of Britain's ethnic minorities, Asians had their businesses frequently torched or vandalised and their places of worship regularly desecrated.

For some, the experience of this generation was a microcosm of the Muslim experience. As Quraishi's study affirms, a perception of persecution by the police is sharpened by daily experience. Was this the type of recognition that prompted the submission of some to a form of Islam that lay outside the scope of their parents' normal understanding? And, if so, can it be the reason why some British Asians have pursued martyrdom typically associated with Hezbollah, though not necessarily in the war-torn Middle East, but in urban England?

While none of the books actually argues this, there is enough cumulative inferential evidence to make it intelligible. The events of 7/7 and the arrests that followed came amid talk about racial profiling at British airports and debate about the influence of training camps known as *madrasahs* (religious schools), and the so-called 'radicalisation' of Muslim youth. The spectre of racism re-appeared: stories of people suspected of being Muslims being marched off planes to appease the paranoia of other passengers and Asian youths being carefully avoided on public transport combined with all manner of conspiracy theories

The idea that young British-born and -educated Asians would prepare for the spiritual struggle initiated by Muslims against unbelievers—the *jihad*—in special training schools in leafy parts of England would once have been preposterous. Yet counter-terrorist police squads appeared to raid the most unlikely places—like Chinese restaurants—and uncover new evidence of young Britons' involvement with plots practically every month. The sense of victimisation documented by Hussain and Miller was given fresh evidence.

British Asians are now at the centre of arguably the most challenging question to face scholars of race and ethnicity in the new century: why would young men and women, born in Britain, some studying at university, others in professional careers, many with young wives and families, decide they wanted to kill innocent people, including other Asians?

Even allowing for a degree of over-reaction from the forces of law and order, assisted by some hysterical sections of the media, there is enough indirect evidence and conjecture to suggest that many young British-born Asians consider themselves in a form of captivity; several of the titles under review allude to, if not confirm this. Their escape, as they see it, is not achievable by departing the country, nor with political protest.

It is difficult to think of an area of society anywhere in the world that remained unaffected by 9/11. It impacted the manner in which practically every aspect of race and ethnic affairs is addressed, sparking debates about the supposed incompatibility of cultures. Even so, few anticipated the full geopolitical resonance. Perhaps *everything* changed. And perhaps *nothing* changed. At least, that is my impression

gleaned from the reviewed books. They indicate that young British Asians have complaints about their society and, given flashpoint events, such as the presence of far-right political organisations, they might even resort to violence, as indeed they did in the riots of 2001. Yet typically, events such as these do not motivate people to genocide, suicide bombings or attempts to bring down aircraft.

While none of the titles under review make it explicitly clear, at least some part of their message is that 9/11 did not change British society as deeply as we might imagine. In fact, to view the entire Asian experience through the lens of one episode, crucial as that episode might be, is misleading. Young people from various ethnic backgrounds gripe about specific instances of discrimination or more generic or institutional patterns. This did not start with 9/11. What changed is that these complaints were reconstituted in a grammar that includes other instances of perceived injustice elsewhere in the world. Bewildering as it may seem to some, a refusal at a bar or a brush with a discourteous police officer can apparently be joined as if by a chemical chain to struggles in the Middle East or South Asia. The formula produces an apprehension of living in a culture without belonging to it, working with friends who are also enemies and being part of an alliance that may exist only in the imagination.

My complaint against all the books under review is their failure to address this. None clarify whether this kind of mindset is shared by only a minority of a minority, an enclave of homicidal, obscurantist fundamentalists who want to create mayhem. Hussain and Miller's work inclines the reader to think that it is rather more pervasive, offering a way of understanding the overall narrative in which the West and Islam have featured since Christian expeditions tried to recover Jerusalem from Muslims in the eleventh century. But rational analysis is often a casualty of ideology, as are policy-driven directives. At a time when the Western world has begun to see the maturation of countless strategies all designed in some way to enhance integration, cohesion, equality of opportunity and the acceptance of cultural diversity as beneficial and racism as malevolent, an age-old discord has returned, albeit in a new guise. Research on the British Asian experience should surely try to engage with this.

Uncivilised Culture?

We need to stay aware of the problems of giving a bogus equivalence to dissimilar belief systems, of course. But there is surely a corrosive power in a system of belief that is associated with, or even commissions, the 'honour killings' of people who defy the edicts of some forms of Islam and Sikhism. And, while it is possible to understand Muslims' repugnance at the West's treatment of Islam, the response is dismaying. It is difficult to see what bounties are offered by a puritanical, misogynistic, homophobic and sometimes anti-Semitic contempt that forecloses any possibility of dialogue.

This is a view expressed by representatives of British Asians, especially those incredulous Muslims who can see neither rhyme nor reason behind the rise of

fundamentalism and who object to what they see as a hijacking of Islam. Within the ranks of Britain's 3 million Muslims, there is alarm at the pious brutality that has distorted the architecture of Islam.

There is also moral revulsion when runaway brides end up on the streets or even dead rather than succumb to arranged marriages. Do we remain grudgingly respectful of religions that countenance this, or do we subject them to critical interrogation, an interrogation that is disappointingly absent from any of these books?

The forbearance of customs, practices and the beliefs that elicit them has been a staple of multiculturalism since the 1980s. Early-century events have made this seem less justifiable. Every belief-system secretes dogma; some even condemn uncommon interpretations of their articles of faith. But how do you condone, less still encourage, credos based on an intolerance of all alternative worldviews? Credos that insist that what many regard as human rights are indulgences of a decadent, supercilious moral order convinced of its own superiority. It is acknowledging the right of someone to hold convictions even if those convictions involve killing you. Events since 9/11 have, as Hussain and Miller's research implies, hastened an enraged solidarity among Muslims. 'Your culture is wrong, uncivilized', fumes one respondent. This seems less a perspective, more a statement of doctrine.

Kaur Rait assures us that Sikh precepts, particularly those relating to arranged marriage, are 'not static but flexible, to accommodate the changing demands of time' (and several other exigencies, we assume). Yet we read accounts of women involved in violent, heartless relationships, yet fearful of the shame that will follow should they make public their tribulation. 'If we "professional Asian women" are fighting for our freedom or basic human rights at home, our employment is regarded as a form of escapism', declares 'an unfortunate soul', as she describes herself. 'We [Asian women] are expected to do as we are told . . . but we continue to try to balance ourselves on a double-edged sword'.

In a breathtaking understatement, Kaur Rait concludes: 'Various issues have arisen from integration into British life which have caused problems for the community'. She then cites 'isolation . . . language and cultural barriers, the generation gap, divorce or lack of parental support'. She never elaborates what 'cultural barriers' are or whether they can be surmounted. In fact most of her evidence undermines her observations about flexibility and change. Rigidity and stasis are more conspicuous.

Like the other books under review, there is illuminating evidence followed by a swerve. If a culture prescribes odious punishments for transgressions of a moral code, or clings to convictions that summon Armageddon, or listens obediently to strife-fomenting tyrants, why respect it?

In fairness, none of the titles reviewed here promises to answer this question. In fact, it could legitimately be argued that they have no need to. The British Asian experience can be analysed without continual resort to questions about the nature of multicultural society. Yet there is a situation in which conflicting demands make it impossible to do the right thing. We can ignore the manifold consequences of 9/11, as these texts do, or confront them and risk reducing the entire experience to the effects

of one event. But it seems to me that any scholarly analysis of British Asian life that refuses to notice it risks petrification. And all of the titles reviewed here succumb to precisely this.

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