

Pakistani identities and communities in Britain

Summary

This paper is an abbreviated version of chapter 1 of *The Achievement of British Pakistani Learners* by Robin Richardson and Angela Wood, published by Trentham Books in summer 2004, and reprinted with revisions in 2005. There is fuller information at www.insted.co.uk/raise.html. The paper begins by quoting from a conversation amongst four 14-year-old school students about how they see themselves. It then recalls the historical background – how and why the grandparents of these four students came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s from West Pakistan. It stresses that British Pakistani people are 'a community of communities', not a monolithic bloc, and that particular attention needs to be paid in the education system to Kashmiri communities. It ends with a statistical summary.

Introduction: Being and becoming

'Do you like being called British Asian?' Shakeel asks a group of friends. 'I like Paki better. I'm a Paki. What do you think?' Kiran replies: 'I think of myself as a British Asian Muslim.' Samina says: 'I'm a Muslim, I believe in Islam.' And Shazad: 'I don't think of myself as a Muslim and I don't think of myself as a Pakistani... I *may* be a Muslim, but I don't think of myself as Muslim. I think of myself as a British Asian, that is what I think of myself.'¹

Shakeel, Kiran, Samina and Shazad were all aged 14 at the time of that particular conversation in summer 2003. The answers they gave to themselves and to each other that day showed a lively interest in their own being and becoming – their own personal, cultural and national identity. The answers showed also that they are continually pondering, probing, choosing, developing, each his or her own person.

The Achievement of British Pakistani Learners is about people such as Shakeel, Kiran, Samina and Shazad, and about their younger and older brothers and sisters; about the futures they are creating for themselves in modern Britain; about their parents and community and their local mosque and madrasahs; about conflicting pressures on them and how they balance and make sense of these; and, especially, about their experiences and aspirations in the school system. The book is intended in particular for teachers in mainstream schools. Parts of it, though, are likely to be of interest and use also to teachers in madrasahs. And parts, it's reasonable to hope, will intrigue Shakeel, Kiran, Samina and Shazad themselves.

The opening chapter contains a brief sketch of history, to recall where these young people are coming from. The following chapter outlines the pressures on them, to recall the range of futures and places they may be going to. The third chapter is about how they are getting on at school. The rest of the book is about practical implications for their teachers.

The early pioneers

The grandfathers of Shakeel, Kiran, Samina and Shazad, it may be imagined, came to Britain in the early 1950s as young men looking for work. They had grown up in the Mirpur district of Azad Kashmir in what is now Pakistan.² There is a longstanding

¹ The conversation is derived and adapted from focus group discussion at a school in Rotherham, summer 2003. Amongst English-heritage people the word Paki is almost invariably derogatory. There is a trend amongst young Pakistani-heritage people themselves, however, to reclaim the word as a badge of pride. *Pak* means pure and *Pakistan* is the land of the pure.

² In 1947 the country known as India was split into two, India and Pakistan. The latter had two parts, West Pakistan and East Pakistan, several hundred miles apart from each other. All its

tradition there of young men leaving home for a few years to earn money for their family. These particular young men chose Britain because they or their friends and relatives had served in the British army or in the British merchant navy during the second world war. Also, their energy, determination and readiness for hard work were desperately needed by the British economy – there were tasks of post-war reconstruction to be seen to, and new manufacturing processes meant there was a great demand for people to work night shifts in Britain’s textiles and steel industries.

The young Pakistanis who came in the 1950s took on jobs and working conditions that the indigenous British refused to accept for the wages on offer. They lived together in all-male households and concentrated on earning and saving money to send home. From time to time they went back to Pakistan for extended periods and whilst there they got married and started families. They took for granted that one day they would go back for good. There was no need for them to learn more than basic English, and in any case they encountered great hostility and racism from the English people whom they did come across. They were not invited by the English to integrate into English society.

Around 1960–62, the young husbands were faced with a choice. They either had to return to their families in West Pakistan or else they had to bring their families to Britain. Large numbers, including the grandfathers of Shakeel, Kiran, Samina and Shazad, chose the latter option. In consequence they began to see themselves as settlers, not as migrant workers – though ‘the myth of return’, as academics call it, persisted for at least two more decades. Certainly the children of the pioneer generation saw themselves as British, however, particularly those who were born here in the course of the 60s and 70s. And so did their grandchildren, born in the 1990s.

Of the eight parents of Shakeel, Kiran, Samina and Shazad, it may be imagined that four were born in Britain, two came to Britain as small children and two came in young adulthood as brides or bridegrooms. When talking with their grandparents and mothers, Shakeel, Kiran, Samina and Shazad converse in the language they learnt first when they were toddlers, variously known as Punjabi, Pahari or Mirpuri. They use English when talking with each other and with their brothers and sisters. Also, more often than not, they speak English with their fathers. They readily understand the spoken language known as Urdu/Hindi that is used in movies and videos and are beginning to study written Urdu as a modern foreign language at GCSE. From their attendance at madrasahs, they can read, write and recite Qur’anic Arabic. The terms ‘bilingual’ and ‘EAL’ to describe them are therefore misleading and do not do justice to their substantial linguistic agility and prowess.

History in one town

The life-stories of the families of Shakeel, Kiran, Samina and Shazad can be filled out with reference to just one of the towns where people from Pakistan settled. In 2001, a report on Oldham included a brief history of the town as a prelude to discussing its present challenges and future development. There are broad similarities between Oldham and several other towns or cities in England where Pakistani-heritage people are settled, and it is relevant therefore to quote from the report. The summary below refers to trends and concerns that are widespread, not limited to Oldham alone.³

... We have to look first at the industrial history of the town. In the late 19th century, Oldham produced 30 per cent of the world’s spun

citizens were known as Pakistanis. Subsequently West Pakistan and East Pakistan became two separate countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh. *The Achievement of British Pakistani Learners* is about British people whose background is in the country now known as Pakistan and previously as West Pakistan.

³ *One Oldham One Future* (the Ritchie report), 2001

cotton, and a very large proportion of the machinery used in textile production. Other industries had a foothold in Oldham, and at one time there was significant coal-mining, but their importance compared with cotton spinning was always minor, and there were few towns as wholly dependent on one industry as Oldham.

This had two main consequences relevant to our review. The first was that much of the employment in Oldham was relatively low skilled and, except for a few boom periods, relatively low paid. Despite efforts to improve the employment base of the town as the cotton industry declined Oldham has remained, relatively, a poor town.

... The second consequence of heavy dependence on a single industry was that, as working conditions and expectations improved in the nation generally it became harder for mill owners to recruit people for unsocial work such as night shifts which were essential to the economy of their enterprises. So people willing to work these shifts were encouraged to migrate, initially from Pakistan, later from Bangladesh, which laid the foundations for the current Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities within the town.

The early arrivals from Pakistan formed a community which was culturally very distinct from the white population, in dress, in language, in religion and other customs, as well of course as colour. The majority came from the same area, Mirpur, and working the night shift as a group meant that they had less contact with white society, and the English language, than many immigrants... The degree of difference undoubtedly made the challenge of achieving an acceptable level of integration harder. It has not yet been achieved, and the progress over the last 40 years has been unacceptably low.

In the early 1970s one of the school pupils in Oldham was Lee Jasper, who two decades later would be an adviser on race equality issues to the Mayor of London. Immediately after the disturbances that rocked the town and the whole nation in summer 2001, he wrote an article in which he recalled his teenage years.⁴ He described teachers in the 1970s as 'unreconstructed racists', no different in their attitudes from the foul-mouthed police officers whom he and his friends encountered on the streets. He said that they regarded having to teach black and Asian pupils as 'an insult both to their professional standing and to their notion of Empire'. There is a fuller extract below:

Unemployment in the 70s brought the town to its knees. At that time we young black people were in the process of breaking the hearts of our parents by rebelling against a school system that found it impossible to deal with us... Education was typical of the attitudes of the time: the posh kids got all the attention ... The teachers were in the main ex-grammar-school, unreconstructed racists. That they were forced to teach blacks and Asian children was an insult both to their professional standing and to their notion of Empire. They made their distaste known by the expression of their extreme prejudice. They simply refused to teach us.

Police racism was cruel, violent and unremitting. Once my mother was trying to find out why I was in a police car. She was told by the officer: "Fuck off, you nigger bitch." Police response to victims of racial attacks was: "If you don't like it, move."

⁴ Brickbats for Oldham, *The Guardian*, 29 May 2001

...It ought to be no surprise that communities suffering such extreme economic marginalisation and social segregation should seek to defend themselves. There is a historical failure of the town to challenge its own institutional racism. Islands of exclusion imprison within them boundless talent and creativity, confined by sheer walls of discrimination and lack of opportunity. People will inevitably cleave tightly to the central tenets of their culture and faith. Occasionally when provoked they will react like a cornered tiger.

Many other black and Asian people who were at school in Britain in the 1970s have memories and perspectives similar to those of Lee Jasper. Such memories are corroborated by white people who were teachers or LEA officers in the 1970s. One such person recalls a secondary headteacher who openly declared in 1979 that his job, in relation to the South Asian pupils at his school, was 'to get rid of their strange and funny ways – their gibberish language, their silly clothes, their strange awful food, their strange and funny religion.'

Lee Jasper and his contemporaries are now the parents of the generation to which Shakeel, Kiran, Samina and Shazad belong. They would probably acknowledge that teachers nowadays are rather different from the ones that they had to deal with when they were young. They suspect, however, that there are still low expectations and negative stereotypes in at least some staffroom cultures, and that this is one of the reasons their children do not have the success at school that they want for them. Meeting failure at school, the children turn for moral support and personal dignity to each other and to street culture. In Lee Jasper's words they are all too ready then, when provoked, to 'react like a cornered tiger'.

Patterns and history of settlement

The imagined family history of Shakeel, Kiran, Samina and Shazad, and the real history of Oldham and the real reminiscences of Lee Jasper and his contemporaries, can readily be placed within the wider national context. It was in the 1950s that migration from Pakistan began on a large scale. It mainly involved men in the first instance. In Bradford in 1961, for example, all but 81 of the 3,376 Pakistanis in the city were men. Migration was encouraged because there were major labour shortages in Britain, particularly in the steel and textiles industries of Yorkshire, Lancashire and the West Midlands, and particularly for night shifts. In southern England the main places of Pakistani settlement were Luton and Slough, where the principal sources of employment were in light industry.

The workers who came were needed by the economy. They were actually or in effect invited by employers. As Commonwealth citizens they had full rights of entry and residence, and full civic rights. They came principally from Punjab Province in West Pakistan (now known as Pakistan), from the north western part of Kashmir administered by Pakistan, known as Azad Kashmir, or from the Sylhet area of the country now known as Bangladesh, but then as East Pakistan.

In all of these largely rural areas there was a longstanding tradition of young men migrating for lengthy periods to other countries or regions to raise money for their families back home. The migration to Britain was thus from a rural setting to an urban one as well as to a different country and culture, and involved an increase in wealth and income as well as a change of occupation. In the case of the Mirpuris it was affected by the building of the Mangla Dam on the river Jhelum in the years following independence. The dam displaced the populations of some 250 villages, about 100,000 people altogether. Many of the villagers received compensation money and some used a portion of this to finance their journey to Britain.

In addition to those who came from rural areas, significant numbers of Pakistani settlers in the 1960s were from towns and cities. A high proportion of these had professional qualifications in teaching, medicine or engineering. Many of them had their family roots in post-1947 India rather than in Pakistan itself. They tended to settle in London rather than in the Midlands or North.

The Pakistani community in Britain is thus a community of communities, not a monolithic whole. There are substantial differences in terms of the areas of Pakistan from which people originated and their original socio-economic position before they migrated; the pattern of push-and-pull factors which affected their original migration; the areas of the British economy which they joined when they first arrived and the economic history of those areas since the 1960s; and their current employment status, social class and geographic location. At an inquiry in Bradford in the 1990s a witness gave a vivid account of the complexity of identity and community from his own point of view. All Pakistani-British people experience broadly similar complexities and richness:

'I could view myself as a member of the following communities, depending on the context and in no particular order: Black, Asian, Azad Kashmiri, Mirpuri, Jat, Marilail, Kungriwalay, Pakistani, English, British, Yorkshireman, Bradfordian, from Bradford Moor ... I could use the term 'community' in any of these contexts and it would have meaning. Any attempt to define me only as one of these would be meaningless.'

In the Midlands and the North, and also in towns such as Luton and Slough, the vast majority of Pakistanis (probably 85 per cent or more) have their roots in Azad Kashmir. Much more than is the case with Pakistanis in London (who in any case largely have their origins in other parts of Pakistan) they have been severely affected by changes in the British economy, particularly steel and textiles industries, since the 1970s. The collapse of the industries they originally came to work in has meant that many of them are now living in considerable poverty. Compared with the rest of the population, British-Kashmiri children are more likely to be living in workless households and in households where there is serious ill health. At least two fifths of them are eligible for free school meals, compared with a national average of less than one fifth. The problems of poverty are exacerbated by racism on the streets (British Pakistani people are far more likely to be targeted in racist attacks and abuse than any other community) and by pervasive anti-Muslim hostility in the media.

Developing as Muslims

In the early days, as mentioned above, most Pakistani migrants to Britain saw themselves as temporary visitors who would one day return to their country of origin. A turning point came in 1961. It was then that the UK government began to restrict migrant workers through the Commonwealth Immigration Act. There was an eighteen month gap between the passing of the Act and its enforcement and this provided time for the young Pakistani men to take stock. Did they really want to return to their country of origin, as they had always hitherto expected and planned? Or did they want to make Britain their home?

For a range of reasons, the vast majority chose to settle. By 1964, the Ministry of Labour had stopped granting permission for the unskilled to work in Britain. One impact of this legislation was that men who had formerly shared a house with others now began looking for houses for their families. A second was that with the arrival of wives and children there was a desire to impart religious education by teaching the basic beliefs and the practices of Islam. This meant allocating a house for their children's education in the neighbourhood and using the same house for the five daily prayers. Islamic dietary laws saw the development of halal butcher shops. Imams were brought from Azad

Kashmir to lead worship. Although more self-consciously Muslim than previously in their sense of identity, and more observant in the practice of their faith, the settlers did not readily distinguish between components of Islam that are universal and components that are distinctive of rural Kashmir. This was by no means surprising, but it did contribute to later problems.

Before 1964 only seven new mosques had been registered in Britain. But in 1964 itself a further seven were registered and over the next decade there were about eight new registrations each year. From 1974 onwards new registrations were running at 25–30 a year.⁵ The creation of mosques was both a cause and a consequence of increased Islamic observance and Muslim self-definition. In the first instance most mosques were converted from existing buildings. But increasingly from the 1970s onwards they were purpose-built. In autumn 1996 it was estimated that there were 613 mosques in Britain, of which 96 were purpose-built.

Researchers at the Policy Studies Institute in the mid 1990s asked a wide range of British people about the importance of religion in their lives. About three quarters of the Muslim respondents said that religion was very important and four in five Muslim men over the age of 35 reported that they visit a mosque at least once every week.

This strengthening of religious belief and practice was influenced by:

- ❑ the desire to build a sense of corporate identity and strength in a situation of material disadvantage, and in an alien and largely hostile surrounding culture
- ❑ the need, now that communities contained both children and elders, to keep the generations together
- ❑ wishing to transmit the community's values to children and young people
- ❑ the search for inner spiritual resources to withstand the pressures of racism and Islamophobia, and the threat to South Asian culture and customs posed by western materialism and permissiveness.

There were other influences as well. The increased influence of Islam in the politics of Pakistan in the 1970s was a significant factor, as was the increased influence in international affairs of oil-exporting countries, most of which were Muslim. Both of these trends contributed to Muslim self-confidence and assertiveness within Britain. In addition, and even more importantly, a sense of community strength grew through the 1980s out of successful local campaigns to assert Muslim values and concerns, for example for halal food to be served in schools and hospitals, and from the extremely high-profile campaign to protest against the insulting vilification of Islam, as Muslims in Britain almost unanimously saw it, perpetrated by Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

More recently, there has been successful advocacy nationally for the recognition of Muslim identities in public life. Notable developments include changes in employment law, so that Muslims are now protected from direct and indirect discrimination in employment; changes in the criminal justice system, so that crimes against Muslims may attract higher sentences if they are deemed to be aggravated by anti-Muslim hostility; the appointment of Muslims to take chaplaincy roles in hospitals, prisons and universities; changes in the financial services industry to accommodate Muslim beliefs and values relating to loans; a new sensitivity to the dangers of Islamophobia in the

⁵ The figures here are quoted from *Islamic Britain: religion, politics and identity among British Muslims* by Philip Lewis, I B Tauris 1994.

media; and a wide range of organisations and websites devoted to the interests and needs of British Muslims. Whether these advances prove to be real and lasting or whether there will be retreat from them remains to be seen.⁶

Islamophobia and 'political Islam'

Problems of coping with secularism, and distinguishing between Islam in general and Punjabi/Mirpuri traditions and culture in particular, were exacerbated by rising levels of Islamophobia – alternatively known as anti-Muslim racism – throughout the 1990s.

Simultaneously there was a growth world-wide in so-called fundamentalism or political Islam and this was readily attractive to some Pakistani-British young men in their late teens and early 20s. In summer 2001 there were disturbances in northern cities involving young Pakistani-British males and these had a profound effect throughout the country.

There is fuller discussion of these issues in a separate chapter in *The Achievement of British Pakistani Learners*.

Concluding note

This paper has outlined the historical, cultural and social context in which Shakeel, Kiran, Samina and Shazad are building their identities and futures and in which they engage with the education system. The same context affects their teachers, both in madrasahs and in mainstream schools. A separate chapter discusses in greater detail the range of pressures and influences bearing upon them.

First, before this introductory chapter ends, there are some statistics about BritishPakistani pupils in the English school system. How many are there and whereabouts in England do they mostly live? Table 1 on the next page gives the answers. It is derived from figures published by the DfES following its survey of the school population in January 2003.

⁶ For fuller discussion see *Islamophobia: issues, challenges and action* by the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, Trentham Books 2004. The complete text can be downloaded at www.insted.co.uk/islam.html.

Table 1: Pakistani-heritage pupils in primary and secondary schools, January 2003

<i>Region</i>	<i>Primary schools</i>	<i>Secondary schools</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
North East	1,680	1,270	2,950	1.7
North West	17,140	12,320	29,460	16.8
Yorkshire and Humber	22,260	17,380	39,640	22.6
East Midlands	4,040	2,730	6,770	3.9
West Midlands	23,200	16,960	40,160	22.9
East of England	5,430	4,380	9,810	5.6
London	16,630	14,000	30,630	17.5
South East	7,740	6,730	14,470	8.3
South West	690	520	1,210	0.7
Totals	98,810	76,290	175,100	100.0

Source- *Statistics of Education: Schools in England 2003 Edition*

Table 1 shows that in January 2003 there were 175,100 pupils of Pakistani heritage in English primary and secondary schools. Rather more than half (98,810, or 56 per cent) were in primary schools. Nearly a half (45.5 per cent) were in just two regions, the West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humber. The other two regions with substantial numbers were London (17.5 per cent) and the North West (16.8 per cent). Further, there are pupils of dual heritage, with one parent being of Pakistani heritage. It is not known how many of the 93,290 pupils of mixed Asian and white heritage or 'any other mixed background' have a Pakistani parent.

In addition to the 169,080 pupils in primary and secondary schools, there were 2,902 Pakistani-heritage pupils in special schools. The total in all three sectors was therefore 178,002.

The age-profile of Pakistani communities in Britain is different from that of the population as a whole. A higher proportion of Pakistani-heritage people are under twenty, and a lower proportion are over sixty. Because of these demographic facts, the communities are bound to increase in size over the next twenty years, both absolutely and relatively. It has been estimated that the Pakistani-heritage population will eventually stabilise towards the year 2020 at about 1,250,000. At the time of the 2001 census, it was 747,285.

The percentages in the right hand column of Table 1 are shown in graphic form in Figure 1 overleaf.

Figure 1 Pakistani-heritage pupils by region

