

# British Muslim identities

## – pressures and choices for the young

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### Summary

This paper is an abbreviated version of chapter 2 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](http://www.insted.co.uk/raise.html). The paper points out that young British Pakistanis and Kashmiris, like all other young British people, seek and shape their identities within a range of influences and pressures. Some of the influences are mutually compatible but others are in conflict and young people are pulled in opposite directions. There are notes here about family life; the mosque and mosque-based education; new developments in Islamic theology and spirituality; street culture and youth culture; and currents of thought and influence loosely known as 'fundamentalism'.

### Overview

'My worries are,' says the father of Tanveer, a Year 9 student, 'next two years, if he doesn't look deeply at himself, what he's doing, he's going to miss the opportunity of a lifetime.' Young British Pakistanis, like all other young British people, seek and shape their identities within a range of influences and pressures. Some of the influences are mutually compatible and they therefore reinforce each other. Others, however, are in conflict and young people are pulled in opposite directions. Tanveer's parents, like all parents, fear that he won't manage the conflicts with optimum success. There are notes in this paper about some of the poles towards which young British-Pakistani people may be attracted, and from which they may be repelled:

- family life
- the mosque and mosque-based education
- new developments in Islamic theology and spirituality
- street culture and youth culture
- currents of thought and influence variously known as 'fundamentalism', or 'political Islam'.

Also, schools exert enormous influence, both attractive and repelling. This point is introduced in chapter 3 of *The Achievement of British Pakistani Learners* and is discussed in its many facets throughout chapters 4–11.

Some of the difficulties of navigating between different pulls and pushes are evoked in Tariq Mehmood's novel *While there is Light*, published in autumn 2003. The main character came from Pakistan to live in Bradford when he was a child. As an adult he returns for a visit to Pakistan. 'I thought I understood the world,' he says to himself (in English) at one stage. 'But ... I am nothing more than *Valaiti-babu*, a *gora* [white man] imprisoned in the skin of a Paki. A Paki in England, unwanted. A *Valaiti* [Britisher] in Pakistan, naive, arrogant, despicable.'

### Family life

Three groups of Year 6 Pakistani-heritage pupils in a northern city were asked what they thought their parents wanted for them in later life. The full range of their replies is illustrated with the following phrases:

- 'get a good report'
- 'do well in football or cricket'
- 'be good'
- 'be a doctor or nurse'
- 'have good luck'
- 'get good GCSEs and a good job'
- 'be good at work'
- 'be sorted'.

Children from other ethnic backgrounds were also included in the interviews. Their answers were virtually identical, except that there was reference amongst white children to having boyfriends and girlfriends, and to 'being best'. But basically, the point is, Pakistani-heritage parents have the same high aspirations and expectations for their children as do all other parents. This was illustrated in interviews with parents of Year 9 learners. Shazad's mother said: 'I want him to go to university, achieve his goals and be happy in life. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy, you expect him to achieve and so he does. Sometimes they say to me "You expect us to be so perfect", and I say "You can, you can!"'

Year 9 learners themselves said:

- 'Parents used to tell us "We didn't do that good at school, and we hope you do", and we used to just laugh, thinking it's funny – but now we're older and wiser.'
- 'They just want me to do really good, and they go "Whatever you want to do, we'll always be behind you".'

Pakistani families, like all families, vary in their approaches to bringing up children and in the boundaries and constraints they place on, and the freedoms they permit to, teenagers. But young British Pakistanis, like all young people at all times and in all places, may be impatient or critical regarding some of their parents' loyalties and priorities.

Monica Ali's best-selling novel *Brick Lane* is about a Bangladeshi-heritage family, not a Pakistani one. But many young British Pakistani people will recognise the kinds of tension that the novel affectionately but poignantly explores, not least since British-Pakistanis and British-Bangladeshis have in common the Islamic religion. There are tensions between parents and teenagers, between sisters, between father and mother; and between home and school, home and street, home and community. The head of the household in the novel is Chanu. One day he accesses a Bangladeshi website on his computer and calls his teenage daughters to look at it. One, Bibi, dutifully does so. The other, Shahana, declines. The mother, Nazneen, tries to be a peacemaker. The scene that follows shows how the dynamics that exist in all families in all cultures may be played out in one particular family in one particular place and context. Shahana, by the way, has recently developed the mannerism of blowing at her fringe. Rightly or wrongly, her father interprets this as insolence.

... He was waiting for Shahana. Nazneen put her hand on Shahana's arm. 'Go on, girl,' she whispered. Shahana did not budge. 'Take a little look.'

'No. It's bor-ing.'

Chanu jumped up and turned round in one movement so that the dining chair toppled. His cheeks quivered. 'Too boring for the memsahib?'

'She's going to look now,' said Nazneen. Bibi backed away from her father, a barely perceptible shuffling that gave the impression that she was responding to the tug of her mother's force field.

'What is the wrong with you?' shouted Chanu, speaking in English.  
'Do you mean,' said Shahana, "'What is wrong with you?' She blew at her fringe. 'Not "the wrong".'

## **The mosque**

Up to the age of 14 most British Pakistani children attend a local mosque school. The pedagogical style is typically different from that which they encounter at their mainstream school, for it puts much emphasis on learning the Qur'an in Arabic by heart and on oral repetition (*tartil/tajwid*), and gives relatively low priority, in the first instance, to discussion and intellectual understanding. The imams and other teachers at the mosque schools mostly received their own education, both secular and religious, outside Britain. There is an increasingly widespread perception in Muslim communities that such imams are not equipped by their own training to help young British Pakistanis cope with issues such as unemployment, racism and Islamophobia, drugs and drug-dealing, and the attractions of Western youth culture. The extract below contains a description of mosque-based education in the mid 1990s and summarises the concerns which many Muslim observers continue to have.

The growth of Muslims in Britain has created in some ways a generation gap. In the early days of migration and settlement, Muslims imported imams to run their local mosques and teach their children basic Islamic education. The imams presumed that the children they were teaching in the mosques and madrasahs were the children of Mirpuris, Punjabis or Bengalis and treated them as such. But the reality was different.

During the day schools the children were encouraged to question and reason but the same children, in their evening classes in the mosques, were discouraged from questioning and reasoning. Rather, the emphasis was on repeating and memorising. A child perhaps wants to know the reason behind what she or he is learning, but this was something the imams invariably discouraged. Furthermore, the children's language of communication has increasingly become English, and now for the third generation of Muslims, English is their first language. But in a large number of madrasahs the imams still teach them in Urdu, or in other Asian languages. It is not surprising that there is an increasing frustration amongst the youth about such methods of teaching.<sup>1</sup>

## **New developments in Muslim theology and spirituality**

There are several national and local organisations which seek to promote understanding of the Muslim faith within the setting of a non-Muslim country such as Britain. Their publications and extensive websites are in English, as are the meetings which they organise. In addition to seeking to develop a Muslim theology and lifestyle suitable for non-Muslim settings they provide information and resources about Islam for society at large. The aspirations of such groups were succinctly summarised in an editorial in the magazine *Q News* in autumn 2003:

We are in a critical phase in history in the development of a British form of Islam. The process is bound to be painful and strenuous but it must, and is, taking place. And it is happening in all sorts of places – in the internet cafes, around the local youth hangouts, within the

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<sup>1</sup> Ataulloh Siddiqui, Muslims in Britain Past and Present, *Islam Today*, 1995

mosques and in-between prayers, among mini-cab drivers, city professionals, social workers, teachers, kebab sellers – everywhere the demand is to identify and embrace aspects of our faith that have immediate relevancy to our own identities, spiritual or otherwise.

... Our experimentation of British Islam seems destined to have a greater influence globally. Britain's history, its spiritual landscape, central location vis-à-vis the Muslim world, the nature and composition of its Muslim population, the English language, are all pointing to a unique development.

Is it right at this moment to argue that the prototype of the kind of Islam relevant to the twenty-first century will evolve within the British environment? Are we to be the leading global exporter of a kind of Islam that will truly reflect the great ethos of the faith, a kind of Islam that is relevant for our times – at ease with itself in the global village?<sup>2</sup>

Amongst other things, the development of a British form of Islam – or, more widely, a European or western form of Islam – involves re-considering the traditional pedagogy of mosque-based education, and the theories of knowledge, learning and spirituality that underlie it. The need for such review was alluded to above. It is outlined also in the extract below:

The major question that Western Muslims ask and that perplexes many writers and scholars is this: what happened? What happened to Islam that led to its decline, to its rude shocks when the military vanguards of another and alien culture defeated it so comprehensively over such a long period of time?

The answer is as complex as the question is simple. Huge tomes and learned treatises relate the decline of the Islamic civilisation to a diverse range of economic, industrial, military and other causes. For educationalists, however, one of the key factors appears to have been the alleged ending of *ijtihad*, normally translated as independent reasoning or thinking.

Over time scholars have argued for restoration of *ijtihad* as the means of rejuvenating Muslim civilisation ... The tradition of memorising, it is argued, is no longer able to fit the modern era for which is needed, in addition to the religious matter, analytical knowledge, comprehension and, moreover, contextualisation.

This is not just an esoteric debate, for it goes to the very heart of western Muslims' attempt to locate themselves as western Muslims, and to the pedagogical style that many Muslims undergo at the madrassas.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Editorial in *Q News*, autumn 2003

<sup>3</sup> Source: adapted slightly from a paper by Maurice Irfan Coles, 2003. The full paper appears amongst the RAISE case-studies at [www.insted.co.uk/raise.html](http://www.insted.co.uk/raise.html).

## **Islamophobia**

Islamophobia is a new word in the English language. It was first used in print in 1991 and became widely known after the publication in 1997 of a Runnymede Trust report. The report defined it as 'unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims'.

Hostility towards Islam and Muslims has been a feature of European societies since the Crusades. It has taken different forms, however, at different times and in different circumstances and it has fulfilled a variety of functions. It may be more apt to speak of 'Islamophobias' rather than of a single phenomenon. Each version of Islamophobia has its own features as well as similarities with, and borrowings from, other versions. A key factor since the 1960s is the presence of some fifteen million Muslim people in western European countries. Another is the increased power on the world stage of oil-rich countries, many of which are Muslim in their culture and traditions. A third is the emergence of repressive regimes, and of political movements that use terrorist tactics to achieve their aims, which claim to be motivated and justified by Muslim beliefs. The latter have had a hugely greater profile since 11 September 2001.

The cumulative effect of Islamophobia is that British Muslims are made to feel that they do not truly belong here – they feel that they are not truly accepted, let alone welcomed, as full members of British society. On the contrary, they are seen as 'an enemy within' or 'a fifth column'. This is bad for society as well as for Muslims themselves. Both Muslim and non-Muslim commentators have pointed out that a young generation of British Muslims is developing that feels increasingly disaffected, alienated and bitter.

"The most subtle and for Muslims perilous consequence of Islamophobic actions,' a Muslim scholar has observed, 'is the silencing of self-criticism and the slide into defending the indefensible. Muslims decline to be openly critical of fellow Muslims, their ideas, activities and rhetoric in mixed company, lest this be seen as giving aid and comfort to the extensive forces of condemnation. Brotherhood, fellow feeling, sisterhood are genuine and authentic reflexes of Islam. But Islam is supremely a critical, reasoning and ethical framework, a system of values applicable first and foremost to Muslims. Islam cannot, or rather ought not, to be manipulated into "my fellow Muslim right or wrong".' She goes on to remark that Islamophobia provides 'the perfect rationale for modern Muslims to become reactive, addicted to a culture of complaint and blame that serves only to increase the powerlessness, impotence and frustration of being a Muslim.'<sup>4</sup>

Islamophobia can have the effect of undermining young people's self-confidence and self-esteem, their confidence in their parents and families, and their respect for Islam. It makes extremist organisations, however, attractive in ways that they wouldn't be otherwise. An editorial article in a Muslim periodical has put the point as follows:

For many youngsters, Islam is proving to be a genuine way out, a way to make sense of the bewildering maelstrom of currents surrounding them. For many others, it is a reactionary grab at something they see as a source of opposition. The irony is that by demonising Muslims the mass media is also erecting a romantic notion of opposition to mainstream culture.<sup>5</sup>

## **Street culture, youth culture and 'fundamentalism'**

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<sup>4</sup> Merryl Wynn Davies, *New Internationalist*, May 2002

<sup>5</sup> *Q News*, quoted in the 1997 report of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, p 17.

Older Muslims as well as non-Muslims are deeply concerned about what is happening in British society to young Muslim men, particularly those of Pakistani, Kashmiri and Bangladeshi heritage. 'The parents of these young men,' writes one Muslim observer, 'neglected their religious training, and instead left matters in the hands of the madrasahs. Their experience in the madrasah has been of rote learning without any understanding, an experience that has left them bored and alienated not only from the madrasah but also from religion itself. Frustrated imams throw the more disruptive kids out of the madrasahs onto the streets. Clubbing together in gangs of around 20-30, these young men are listless and bored. The result has very often been the emergence of gang violence and turf wars. "Islam is drab and boring," they say, "it is only about things you are not allowed to do. There is no fun and laughter. We are young and now is the time for enjoyment."' <sup>6</sup>

'This is not just a problem of young Muslim men who have lost their way,' he continues, 'but a failure of the whole community to bring them up with Islamic values. We have neglected their spiritual training (tarbiya) and failed to teach them how to live in this world in accordance with the pleasure of Allah (akhlaqiyyat) in a way that makes sense to them. We have even ignored their secular education; so that, on the streets of despair, turning to drugs seems the best way to make a quick buck or to escape from the pressures of racism, Islamophobia and unemployment.'

'We laugh along with Ali G, writes another Muslim observer, 'because he is everything we do not wish our kids to be, yet see evidence of daily... The species of nominal Muslim Ali G is meant to represent [is] typically unemployed and poorly educated, he is the type who sees a brighter future in taking on the trappings of the LA 'gangsta' rather than the uncool and 'foreign' traditions of his parents... The character gives the lie to the sound bite that Islam is Britain's fastest growing religion...The British Muslim community is haemorrhaging.'<sup>7</sup>

Paradoxically, perhaps, but significantly and ominously, the haemorrhaging to which this author refers, and the negative masculinity to which the author quoted earlier refers, go hand in hand with the claim that they are in fact influenced by Islam. A sociologist who studied young British-Pakistani males in the 1990s in Birmingham, Bradford and London reported that 'Islam... plays a role in the construction of masculinity ... a 'hard' image of tough aggressive macho men.' He mentioned that the youths claimed membership of Hamas or Hizb-ut-Tahrir yet were unaware who Shias were, and how they differed from Sunnis, and did not know what Hamas or Hizb-ut-Tahrir actually represented. They would daub walls with the slogan 'Hamas Rules OK', and support antisemitic, homophobic and misogynist organisations such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir, but this was more an act of rebellion and defiance than to do with the rise of so-called fundamentalism.<sup>8</sup>

'It is all, he said, ' about being "hard".' Islamic terms such as Hamas, Hizb-ut-Tahrir or Tablighi Jamaat were not used with knowledge of what the words stood for but as badges and markers in various kinds of turf war and battles to control pieces of urban space. (In an analogous way, it has been pointed out, some of the supporters of a football team – Millwall is sometimes mentioned in this context – use their team's colours and emblems as markers of identity over and against others on the streets rather to signal deep allegiance to a specific club.)

Extremist organisations and websites in Britain are frequently anti-western and their references to Judaism and Israel are often indistinguishable from crude antisemitism.

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<sup>6</sup> Being a real man in Islam by Yahya Birt, 2001

<sup>7</sup> Faisal Bodi, *Q News*, February 2000, quoted in 'Between Lord Ahmed and Ali G: which future for British Muslims?' published in 2002 on the website of the Ouseley Commission in Bradford.

<sup>8</sup> Yunas Samad (1998), quoted in Lewis (see above).

Their hostility to all things western is a mirror image of western Islamophobia and indeed helps to feed it. Their simplistic messages can be attractive to young people, however, since they appear at first sight to give a satisfactory picture of the total world situation (the West is the root of all evil) and appear to have a clear practical agenda (resistance and struggle). They have far fewer active supporters than the mainstream media claim. The support they do have, as mentioned in some of the quotations above, may reflect a young person's (or, more specifically, a young male's) search for identity in a hostile world rather than a carefully thought through commitment.

## **School**

The lack of educational achievement amongst some young British Muslims is a matter of great concern, as are the unemployment and alienation to which it leads. Chapter 4 of *The Achievement of British Pakistani Learners* discusses the extent and nature of the under-achievement and thus prepares the way for the next main section of the book as a whole.

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