

Muslims In Britain: Past And Present

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Development of the Community

Although Muslim migration to Britain began from the mid-nineteenth century, the immediate opportunity was brought about in 1869 by the opening of the Suez Canal. This facilitated increased trade between Britain and its colonies, and a contingent force of labourers to work on the ships and in the ports. The obvious choice of such labourers were the Yemenis. They were the first group of Muslim migrants who arrived at the British ports of Cardiff, Liverpool, Pollockshields and London.

Between 1890-1903, nearly forty thousand seaman arrived on British shores and about thirty thousand of them, according to one report, spent some part of their lives in Britain.

Inevitably, there was a language barrier between the Yemeni workers and their British employers. This, the Yemenis solved in tribal fashion. Yemeni workers, upon their arrival at British ports, assigned themselves to a particular leader for their daily needs and work requirements. The leaders were usually chosen because of their relatively better communication skills, and their awareness of employers' needs and government requirements. Sometimes this transit period could be extended by months, and this could be a very difficult time for Yemeni sailors.

Bit by bit, some of them began to settle for longer periods and married local British girls. In port cities like Cardiff and Liverpool, there are now several generations of Muslims in the community.

Additionally there were others who migrated and settled in Britain. Civil servants of the British Raj used to visit Britain either to acquire work experience or to take civil service examination in order to gain promotion in their jobs. A small number of them settled in Britain. People such as Abdullah Yusuf Ali, a civil servant and translator of the Qur'an into English, lived, married and died in Britain.

On the one hand, then, we have the British Empire, which attracted increasing numbers of immigrants to Britain, whilst on the other, we have native Britons who were attracted to the faith and beliefs of these immigrants. Pursuant to their regular visits to Muslim countries, these Britons were attracted by the mystical dimension of Islam. Others came into contact with Muslim professionals and students in Britain because they mingled with the British aristocracy; they shared a similar background. These two factors played an important role in establishing Islam in Britain.

During the latter part of the last century and until the beginning of the Second World War, two key institutions emerged, one in Liverpool and the other in Surrey. William H Quilliam, a lawyer in Liverpool, visited Morocco in 1887.

There he was attracted to Islam, and soon became a Muslim, founding *The Liverpool Mosque* and *The Muslim Institute*. He edited *The Islamic World* (begun in 1890) and *The Crescent*, a weekly publication in which he wrote extensively about Islam and

Muslims. A number of tracts were also published. Quilliam also established *Madina House*, a house for orphans in Liverpool. His works attracted both Muslims and non-Muslims alike and also seem to have had a lasting audience abroad.

He received a personal gift from the Amir of Afghanistan and the Ottoman Sultan invited him to visit Istanbul and soon appointed him Shaykh al-Islam.

The Muslim Institute established a Muslim College where it enrolled both Muslim and non-Muslim students. Quilliam's activities attracted a large number of critics and eventually he left Liverpool for Jersey, later returning to work under a pseudonym.

The second important institution, *The Working Mission* was initially begun by Dr Leitner, a Hungarian Orientalist who established a mosque there in 1889, and as a result the place was neglected for the next twelve years, until Khwaja Kamaluddin from India arrived in 1912.

Kamaludin's sole objective was to remove misconceptions about Islam in Britain and perhaps he expected that this would also influence and reduce misconceptions about Islam throughout the Empire. In 1913, he began publishing a monthly journal, *Muslim India* and *Islamic Review* which later changed to *Islamic Review*. The Working Mission enjoyed a considerable boost when Lord Headley converted to Islam. He came into contact with Islam when he went to India in 1896 as a contract engineer. Both Kamaluddin and Lord Headley gave direction to the Mission.

In 1914, Headley established *The British Muslim Society*, aiming perhaps to give a contextual image of Muslims and Islam as part of British society.

While The Working Mission progressed, in London Marmaduke Pickthall announced his conversion to Islam. He too had been in constant touch with The Working Mission. Pickthall translated the Qur'an into English and published a journal from London called The Muslim Outlook. In this way, Britain's contact with Islam continued to deepen at the intellectual as well as the grassroots levels.

Migration after World War II

The mass migration to Britain of Pakistanis (including Bangladeshis) had its origin in colonialism. For example, many soldiers who joined the British army in the war were posted to the British Isles, and some of them began to settle there.

Initially, however, their number was very small, until after the partition of India. Partition caused the displacement of large populations, especially in the Punjab and Mirpur (a significant sector of the populations who joined the British army), who then began to look to their future in Britain over a longer term. The second important factor which contributed to migration was the construction of the Mangla Dam in Pakistan.

This, in effect, displaced 100,000 people, especially the Mirpuris. With their compensation money, some settled in other parts of Pakistan; others, however, looked for the sponsorship of their relatives in Britain and subsequently settled there in large numbers. Their initial intent was to earn enough money to buy a plot of land and build houses for their families and settle in Pakistan.

The rapid increase in demand for unskilled labour in British industries also occasioned large scale migration, the pattern being the same as for the Punjabis or Mirpuris, namely, sponsorship and initial help have tended towards single males, who share houses and work long hours, and then visit families and friends at home for a long break, usually every year or two.

The economic climate in post-war Britain changed rapidly. There were fewer jobs and opportunities for people compared with the early 1950s. Inevitably, the government began to restrict migrant workers and in 1961, the commonwealth Immigration Act was passed which came into force the following year. Arguably, this Act was the turning point in the growth of the Muslim population in Britain.

The eighteen month long gap between the passing of the Immigration Act and its enforcement provided time for reflection for those who were working in Britain: did they want to return to their country of origin, or make Britain their home?

Basically, the Act imposed restrictions on adults intending to work in Britain. By 1964, the Ministry of Labour stopped granting permission for the unskilled to work in Britain. The impact of this legislation was such that each single male who had formerly shared a house with others, now began looking for houses for their families in a nearby neighbourhood. Once their families arrived, the immediate concern of the parents was for their children.

They wanted to impart religious education by teaching the Qur'an, basic beliefs and the practices of Islam to their children. This meant allocating a house for their children's education in the neighbourhood and using the same house for the five daily prayers. Muslim dietary laws saw the development of halal butcher shops and the import of Asian spices. This also gave birth to the Asian corner shops in Britain. In this way, the growth of the Muslim neighbourhood had begun.

The second wave of migration came from East African countries. Asians who were occupied in the wholesale and distributive trade in Africa, provided the necessary banking and financial services.

Their participation in the economy was checked by the Africanization policy of the newly independent African countries. Banks and private businesses were nationalized. This left Asian businessmen and their families with a stark choice between African enterprise, under strict regulation, or leaving the country. They opted for the latter. A large number of Asians had British passports, and so, they decided to come to Britain. This resulted in the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1968, which removed the right of entry to the U.K. for passport holders living abroad.

By the early 1960's, there seems to have been a considerable determination by Muslim countries to send their students for higher education in Britain. This was demonstrated by a slow but steady growth in student populations from Malaysia, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries.

These overseas students started to form Islamic Societies in various British universities. This was within the framework of University and Student Union policies. In 1962, the Islamic Societies felt the need to form a Federation of Islamic Societies

in order to provide basic guidance to new students arriving in Britain, and facilities for Friday prayers in university campuses. They also held annual 'Islamic Weeks', consisting of lectures, exhibitions and video shows and in general, they helped Muslim students with support for their needs.

Gradually, a number of students decided to stay and came to play a leading role within the community. A number of organizations also came into existence including The U.K. Islamic Mission (1962), The Muslim Student's Society (1962), The Union of Muslim Organizations (1970), The Islamic Council of Europe (1973), Young Muslims (1984), The Islamic Party (1989), The Islamic Society of Britain (1990), and, more recently, The Muslim Parliament, The U.K Action Committee of Islamic Affairs, The World Islamic Mission, Jamiat'Ulama -i- Islam and many others. These Muslim organizations and their role is beyond the scope of this article.

One important point to remember though, is that the Muslim community's development in Britain has been overwhelmingly on religious lines, as Punjabis from Pakistan and Sylhetis from Bangladesh have nothing in common culturally, socially, or linguistically. The Punjabi dress, shalwar qamis, and the Sylheti lungi for men and sari for women are not comparable. Differences in eating preferences have similarly affected the varying vocabularies.

For example, a Punjabi might ask whether you have had a roti, (meaning did you have your dinner), whilst a Bengali will emphasize bhat (rice). However, in Britain, Bengalis and Punjabis co-operated in establishing mosques and schools for their children. This co-operation was based more on denominational lines rather than geographical or linguistic grounds. Nonetheless, the Punjabis and Bangalis have obtained Local Authority grants on linguistic and cultural grounds. This is due to the fact that the Local Authorities' help is available on ethnic, linguistic and racial grounds and not on religious ones.

Muslims, Race and Law

Such growing immigration in the country began to present another problem, which eventually led the government to include racial discrimination in the Statute Book as a crime. The Race Relations Act (1976) was passed, and any discrimination on the basis of race in opportunities for employment was considered a criminal offence. This was an advancement in one direction to consider the needs of the immigrant community and to protect those needs.

But soon, protection on the basis of race began to create its own problems. Muslims are a faith community and do not fit into a strict racial definition. Their needs and priorities are different, more to do with religion rather than race.

Muslims, in the eyes of the Race Relations Act, do not constitute an ethnic group and, therefore, in order to prove religious discrimination, Muslims have to prove that they have been discriminated against as a racial group in which their religion is a dominant fact. The victim's geographical and ethnic origin has also to be taken into consideration to establish the discrimination, and this is extremely difficult.

But even in this situation, a significant number of British Muslims, such as European or Afro-Caribbean Muslims, could not be protected. An Asian Muslim woman, for example, can claim protection under the law to adjust her uniform or apparel in a High Street shop according to Islamic norms and most likely the employer will accept this. But, a European or Caribbean Muslim woman will not be able to make a similar appeal. For example, an incident in a bed and breakfast establishment where a White man kept shouting and using abusive language at a White Muslim woman, obviously intending to insult her, was not considered as racial harassment by the local Race Relations officers because the assailant and the victim were both White.

Fostering and adoption laws, again, take a racial stance. For example, the adoption or fostering of a Black child is always to be by a Black family. Here a Muslim would be content to see that a white Muslim child be given to a Black or Asian Muslim Family or vice versa but would be very uncomfortable to see a Black Muslim child, say of Somali origin, fostered into a Black Caribbean Christian family.

But, the Race Relations Act recognizes the latter situation, not the former. In brief, the Muslims in Britain are classified as 'Asian' and their common needs across race and ethnic divides have so far received little or no response from the authorities.

Now the Commission for Racial Equality is proposing – and has received a great deal of support, including that of the Inner Cities Religious Council – to amend the Public Order Act, 1986 and include discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, along with the present grounds of colour, race and nationality (this includes citizenship, ethnic or national origin). This amendment will now extend to cover the British mainland, since in Northern Ireland, incitement on grounds of religious hatred has been incorporated in the Act since 1987. This, if incorporated, will redress, to some extent, the current imbalance.

Contemporary Challenges

Muslims in Britain came, overwhelmingly, from Muslim majority countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Middle Eastern countries. Arriving in a non-Muslim society, they faced language difficulties, cultural apprehensions, and educational expectations; all in all, an overwhelming situation. A substantial number of immigrants thought they were entering into a Christian country.

The perception of the West and Western countries, such as Britain, was of a Christian population, full of religious spirit, with churches full on Sundays.

What they saw, though, was a completely different and unexpected picture of a secular, modern culture where Christianity is marginalized. It has merely a decorative purpose but little value in the everyday lives of people.

Furthermore, critical inquiries about God, prophets, especially Jesus, and religion in general were vilified on television and in their daily encounters with fellow workers in factories and other places.

These views on religion, in general, baffled the Muslim community. This perception, rightly or wrongly, remains in the Muslim psyche. Furthermore, the immigrant communities' own understanding of Islam was marinated with their cultural

understanding of Islam. Thus customs and traditions have played an important role in defining their religion in Britain.

The indigenous community perceived the newly arrived Muslim community as having a monolithic culture with monolithic practices and religious beliefs. They saw Asian, but little difference between Sikhs, Muslims or Hindus. Only five years ago, I attended a Christian-Muslim dialogue group where at lunch time we were served lamb and vegetables along with other items on the menu. One of our hosts asked a member of the kitchens staff whether he had bought the meat from a halal butcher. He replied yes, that he had bought it from an Asian butcher. The host asked if the butcher was a Muslim. He did not know; he presumed that all Asian butchers are halal and had not thought it important enough to inquire about.

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 memorizing.

A child perhaps wants to know the reason behind what she or he was 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.

The increasing use of imams from villages of the Indian sub-continent and the reliance of the congregation of a mosque on day-to-day fiqh issues seems then, a problem rather than a cure. Theological issues, rather than the jurisprudential issues of living in Britain, have hardly been touched upon by imams, nor do they think there is an urgency to do so. They lead daily prayers, they conduct marriages, lead janazah (funeral) prayers and perform similar other requirements of the congregation. However, very few possess the skills and the vision to understand the meaning of living as a Muslim in a pluralist society. The community has recognized this gap and opened up seminaries to train their imams. But the tragedy is that the syllabus of such seminaries hardly reflects contemporary challenges and needs. The only difference between an imported imam and a local trained imam lies in the fact that the latter can convey his message in English, whilst the former cannot.

Muslim youth who become actively involved in Islamic activities during their college and university lives, discover a sense of attachment as well as pride in their religion. Usually their new found faith in Islam questions their parents' beliefs and practices in religion.

At times, the youth seem to become born again Muslims, with a zeal to change their families' and friends' way of practicing Islam. Their missionary zeal convinces them

to see themselves as right, and others as wrong. They see their fellow Muslims as lapsed or inadequate Muslims, and the non-Muslims as potential enemies of Islam, conspiring and colluding against the wider Muslim community, with the general Muslim leadership collaborating with them. The Satanic Verses for example, is presented as a British conspiracy against Muslims. External factors such as the Gulf crisis, the massacre of Muslims in Bosnia, and the issue of wearing the head scarf (hijab) in France strengthens their case.

Today, the Muslim community in Britain is a relatively settled community. The idea of 'going home one day' is rarely heard. As far as the youth are concerned, there are two tendencies: one who associates with the religious ethos, and the other more inclined to 'bhangra' culture.

The two tendencies, though, have one thing in common: they are both agitated groups.

The future course of Muslims in Britain largely depends upon their choice of future directions.