

# **Muslims in Britain**

## **Early history**

Although Muslim migration to Britain began from the mid-19th 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, South Shields and London. Between 1890-1903, nearly 40,000 seaman arrived on British shores and about 30,000 of them, according to one report, spent some part of their lives in Britain. Gradually some of them began to settle for longer periods and married local women. In port cities like Cardiff and Liverpool, there are now several generations of Muslims.

Additionally there were others who migrated and settled in Britain. Civil servants of the British government in India used to visit Britain either to acquire work experience or to take civil service examinations in order to gain promotion in their jobs. A small number of them settled in Britain.

## **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), and these people 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 which 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 was for single males to share houses and work long hours, visiting families and friends at home for a long break every year or two.

The economic climate in post-war Britain changed rapidly, with fewer jobs and opportunities. The government began to restrict migrant workers and in 1961, the Commonwealth Immigration Act was passed, imposing restrictions on adults intending to work in Britain. By 1964, the Ministry of Labour stopped granting permission for the unskilled to work in Britain. Single men who had formerly shared a house with others now began looking for houses for their families. Once their families arrived, a place would be found for their children's religious education and 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. Thus the growth of the Muslim neighbourhood had begun.

## **Muslim diversity**

The second wave of migration came from East African countries. The participation of Asians living in that region was checked by the Africanization policy of the newly independent African countries. Banks and private businesses were nationalized. A large number of Asians had British passports and so decided to come to Britain. (In 1968, though, the Commonwealth Immigration Act removed the right of entry to the UK for passport holders living abroad.)

By the early 1960s many Muslim countries were sending their students for higher education in Britain. There was a slow but steady growth in student populations from Malaysia, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. Gradually, a number of students decided to stay and came to play a leading role within the community.

The Muslim community in Britain is extremely diverse; even within the south Asian population, Punjabis from Pakistan and Sylhetis from Bangladesh have little in common culturally, socially, or linguistically, and their dress and diet are quite distinct. Nevertheless Bengalis and Punjabis co-operated in establishing mosques and schools for their children, co-operation based more on denominational lines than geographical or linguistic grounds. Punjabi and Bangali groups have obtained Local Authority grants, however, because this public assistance is available on ethnic, linguistic and racial grounds and not on religious ones.

In recent years there has been a substantial inflow of Muslim refugees from the other parts of the world, including the Middle East, Near East and Eastern Europe (e.g. Kosovo). There are Muslims from all corners of the world in Britain, including Africa, though from a European (and particularly French) perspective the numbers from North Africa are comparatively low.

### **Contemporary challenges**

In the early days of migration and settlement, Muslims imported imams to run their local mosques and give their children a basic Islamic education. The imams presumed that the children they were teaching in the mosques and madrasahs were Mirpuris, Punjabis or Bengalis and treated them as such. But the reality was different, and a generation gap developed. At day schools the children were encouraged to question and reason but in their evening classes in the mosques the emphasis was on repeating and memorizing. Furthermore, the children's language of communication has increasingly become English, and now for the third generation of Muslims, English is their first language.

The use of imams from villages of the Indian sub-continent and the emphasis on fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) seems a potential problem. Theological issues, rather than the jurisprudential issues of living in Britain, have not been a priority for imams. They lead daily prayers, conduct marriages, lead janazah (funeral) prayers and perform similar other requirements of the congregation. Very few possess, it could be argued, 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, though in the eyes of many people the typical syllabus of such seminaries fails to meet contemporary needs.

Muslim youth who become actively involved in Islamic activities during their college and university lives often discover a sense of attachment as well as pride in their religion. They may come to question their parents' beliefs and practices; some become 'born again'

Muslims, with a zeal to change their families' and friends' way of practicing Islam. 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 view of non-Muslims as potential enemies of Islam.

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 associated with the religious ethos, and the other more inclined to 'bhangra' culture. Both groups are restless, and the future of Muslims in Britain largely depends upon their choice of direction.

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