

"Balti Britain" – "A journey through the British Asian Experience" by Ziauddin Sardar

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Ziauddin Sardar displays all his considerable skills and talents, as a journalist and author, in his latest book, where he goes in search of his identity as a British Asian. His quest takes him from Leicester to Birmingham, through to the streets of Pakistan and back to Oldham. Interwoven into the story is the history of the British Raj, both World Wars, and the defining events since partition, and yet the thread of the story, and a wry sense of humour, remains very clear throughout.

The author's search begins in Leicester, not least because the city is predicted to be the first in the UK to have non-white majority by 2011. The large Asian communities are now an integral part of the commercial and political life of the city, and Sardar points out for the first, but not the last, time, that for the Punjabis in particular there are historical links with the British Army. It is connections like these which have usually determined the final destination of those who have sought a better life away from the Indian subcontinent, and, in terms of personal identity, Sardar argues that "belonging is not just about where you end up".

A visit to Sparkbrook, in Birmingham, takes us to the "Balti Triangle" – 50 Balti restaurants in very small area, and a revelation that "Balti" is actually the Urdu word for a bucket. Whilst a Balti is used for a host of things, containing food is definitely not one of them. However, it is an indication of how the Asian communities have adapted themselves, their traditions and cultures, to the needs of their adopted country and their new customers - and marketed it accordingly. Another surprise is the assertion that the word "curry" has no meaning in the Indian subcontinent, but has become the generic term for a spiced stew anywhere, in the same way that the term "vindaloo" was actually introduced by the Portuguese into Goa.

Sardar also argues that another common misconception held by non-Asians is to assume that there is an "Asian community". India alone has 23 different official languages, never mind the host of different dialects, customs, traditions, histories and religions, and this is reflected in the various communities throughout the UK. This is particularly noticeable in the restaurant business. In the South of England the overwhelming majority of "Indian" restaurants are owned by Bangladeshis, but arrive in Manchester and continue north and the prevalence is of Pakistani owners.

Links with the British Indian Army are brought into sharp focus when Sardar explores the service given by his much-decorated Grandfather, which includes a bizarre family link with the racist, National Front loving Dowager Lady Birdwood. It also allows him to recount the facts that 1.5 million Indians served on the Western Front in the First World War, with the First Battle of Ypres bringing the first of 10 Victoria Crosses to be won by Indians in that war. A grimmer statistic is that of the 58,000 names on the Lion Gate Monument in New Delhi.

The Second World War showed no less courage and determination to come to the aid of the "Mother Country". In the largest volunteer army in that war, no Indian was conscripted, but 2.5 million took up arms. In the Burma campaign 27 Victoria Crosses were awarded, of which 20 went to Indian nationals, out of a total of 31 in the whole war. In terms of identity this has to be set against the background, at that time, of an increasing desire to be independent of Britain. This led to much soul searching after independence as to whether volunteering to serve the Raj was in the best interests of India.

Sardar is also unafraid to confront, and highlight, the blight of racism within the Asian communities, largely expressed through gangs, an increasing number of whom are drug related – often leading directly back to the poppy fields of Afghanistan. He discusses travelling in the Midlands and finding a "complex situation", where he is "shocked by the blatant racism within his own community." This is not unrelated to a growing underclass among Asian youths, poorly educated and unemployed, and largely rooted among the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. Interestingly, Sardar argues that this underclass becomes more obvious, and ever more alienated, in the light of the growing British Asian middle class.

He is not slow to identify the factors leading to this alienation, the roots of which lie in the industrial decline and economic deprivation engineered by Thatcher and her economic policies. With the loss of a significant part of the British industrial base and a huge number of low skilled jobs, which were usually located in areas populated by large numbers of British and migrant Asians, it is little wonder that young people who were looking to be both British and Asian, and already dealing with institutionalised racism in Britain, react negatively. Sardar says that; "To be young and Muslim and Pakistani in Britain is to be angry and frustrated and alienated." As an aside it is interesting to note that, while Karl Marx's economic theories are, rightly, being dusted down again in the light of the current world crisis in capitalism, perhaps we should also be studying his Theory of Alienation more closely, and appreciate that the impact of capitalism stretches further than the City of London or Wall Street.

Having recovered from the shock of the July 2005 London bombings, where "the bombers were as invisible to the Muslim community as everyone else", Sardar pulls no punches in his analysis of the growth of our own home grown terrorism. He argues it is the result of a toxic mix of social injustice and exclusion, economic inequality – and, of course, British Foreign Policy. He also raises, I believe very bravely, one other factor which emanates from Islam itself, and that is the way its teachings can be corrupted by "deranged mullahs". He goes on to say that this "can only work when people have the most limited and purblind ignorance of Islam as religion, civilization and history", and that a "one dimensional view of Islam is obsolete and dangerous to all concerned".

The author makes it clear that this can be tackled and eradicated but there must be a clear strategy to deal with it, and the Muslim community itself must be far braver, and stand up and argue the moderate case. Governments need to pay greater heed to the need for economic regeneration in deprived areas – white and black, and to ensure that all young people receive a decent education. This should also include a recognition that patriotism is, "ideas about history, and other histories which are part of British history." Added to this is the need for a radical change to British foreign policy which "has created a toxic environment in which terrorism could

flourish".

Sardar also argues for a recognition that, "all cultures and civilization are a kaleidoscope of diversity.....and continually negotiate with change". He suggests that bhangra music is a perfect example of this and it "signifies authentic British Asian ethnicity", whereby the "curry and Indian restaurant Syndrome has moved into another domain". He also strongly supports the policy of multi-culturism which he says has been largely successful, and it is all about having a continuous dialogue to explore, understand and adapt. This is obviously totally contrary to the current position taken by the Conservative party who are, once again, showing their complete ignorance and prejudice on such matters by rubbishing the very concept.

"Balti Britain" was a challenging, riveting, and enlightening read from start to finish. If you are looking for ideas, for Christmas presents, this will be well received by anyone who is interested in biographies, history, or simply wishes to broaden their mind. It should also be compulsory reading for those whose racism is born of sheer ignorance.

Balti Britain is published by Granta Publications 2008 380pp £15