

Asians in Britain – Second Generation (by Sarfraz Manzoor) (Spotlight 2/2004)

In Britain today, it is cool to be Asian. The influence of British Asians on the cultural landscape is everywhere. Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is one of the most critically acclaimed novels of the year. The musical

Bombay Dreams is sold out in the West End. On television, both the BBC and Channel 4 have broadcast dramas centred on the lives of young British Asians, while Channel 4's new programme *Bollywood Queen* is a national talent search whose winner will get a part

5 in an Indian film.

What is most significant about all these examples is that they show a new confidence among British Asians. They are not apologizing for their cultural heritage, but are making a virtue of it instead and using it to tell their own distinctive stories. It is a confidence that has been a long time coming.

My father arrived in Britain 40 years ago. He left Pakistan, where his wife and young family remained, and travelled more than 6,000 kilometres to a cold, wet land full of pink strangers who spoke a different language. My father was just one of thousands of immigrants from the Commonwealth who left the West Indies, India and Pakistan and came to Britain at the invitation of the government. The British were seeking immigrants to do work that they themselves did not want to do. The country needed factory workers, bus drivers and postmen. These and a hundred other jobs were eagerly snapped up by the new immigrants.

The immigrants were invited for economic reasons, and it was from an economic standpoint that the new arrivals viewed their new home. To my father, Pakistan was always going to be home, but it was England where work had taken him, and he came seeking to offer his family a better life than we might have had if we had remained in Pakistan.

Coming to Britain offered new opportunities, but it also presented dangers. When you are a first-generation immigrant, it is very clear what "home" is: it is the country where you were born, raised and educated. Once the immigrants settled in Britain and had children, it was inevitable that their offspring would have a more complicated relationship both with Britain and their original culture.

For people of my father's generation, the greatest fear was that their children would stop thinking of themselves as Muslim or Pakistani and instead become just Brits with brown faces. He wanted us to have the best of this country, but he didn't want us to be contaminated by its worst aspects. For him, the best part was the chance to receive a first-class education and the opportunity to make something of ourselves in a country that rewarded merit and talent. It was the freedom to become what we wanted to be. The worst aspect was worrying about where that freedom might lead. My father feared that we would grow up and forget that we were members

25 of a family and not just individuals. He wanted us to be free, but not too free.

I was only three years old when I joined my father, together with the rest of my family, in 1974. We lived in Luton, an industrial town about 50 kilometres north of London. My first memories are of my father coming home from work in the Vauxhall car plant that was located in the south of the town. My mother earned money by sewing dresses at home.

Like most Asians at the time, our family was working-class. Money was very tight and had to be spent wisely. If something did not earn us money or at least lead to the possibility of earning money, it was not worth doing. We did not go on holidays, because

30 holidays did not serve any purpose.

At school, only exam results mattered, and mine had to be better than those of the sons of my parents' friends. Achievement was everything, but it had to be in certain, mainly academic activities. The working-class parents of my father's generation used the success of their children to convince themselves, and the community that they had made good.

I tried to be a good son, and mostly I was. I learned Arabic at home so that I could read the Koran. When Ramadan came once a year, I would do my best to fast, waking up before sunrise to eat, and then going through the day without food and drink until sunset. During religious festivals, I would go to mosque with my father and brother and follow the others in praying. I did not know the rituals, but I would follow those around me and hope that God would forgive my ignorance.

At the same time as my parents were trying to wrap me in my religion and my Pakistani identity, I was also being exposed to other influences. At school, I was the only Asian in my class. The television I watched, the books I read and the music I listened to were American and Western. These things spoke to a different side of my identity. I was reading about far-off places and listening to music that made me dream of a world bigger than the one where I lived. I did not want to be just another Asian living in a no-hope town. I wanted a more exciting life for myself, the world that Bruce Springsteen sang about, where you could get in a car and drive away from a town full of losers with a girl who loved you.

Those dual influences, British and Asian, forced teenagers like me to adopt two separate personas - the only way to negotiate the wildly differing worlds we experienced both inside our homes and outside. We second-generation children of immigrants did not feel confident that we were wholly British, nor did we feel we were truly Pakistanis. On the whole, we tried to fit in, and in front of friends we tried to bleach our identity so that we were not made to feel different.

I left college and went to university, and from there I landed a job in the media. Today, I work for Channel 4 as a commissioning editor, and I also write for British newspapers. Thinking back to where I come from - the town where I return to see my family and my childhood friends - it seems incredible that I have got to where I have. Maybe some of it is talent, but mostly I attribute any success to the opportunities my family allowed me to take - and to the music of Bruce Springsteen, which inspired me to follow my dreams and not settle for anything less.

When I was a teenager, the idea of being a writer or a journalist; or working in television was completely ludicrous. Those things did not happen unless you knew the right people, and the right people were always white. Today's young Asians are far freer to be who they want to be; the only thing preventing them is often their own families. The third-generation Asians to whom I talk are far more confident about asserting their cultural identity than I ever was, and it is that confidence which has allowed them to press themselves on to the national consciousness in a way that was impossible for their parents and older brothers and sisters.

It is because of that confidence that everything Asian - from food to writers and music - has suddenly become fashionable. But with success there comes a danger. The first generation of immigrants knew that they were not British. The second generation wanted to be British, but were not fully accepted. The third generation, the most successful, has become absorbed into the British culture. They have virtually no connection with the land of their parents, and they have grown up with the same cultural diet as their white friends. In many ways, that is a positive thing, but the worry is that once British Asians melt entirely into society, they will lose the very things that make them distinct — the language, the respect for family — and so become nothing more than what my father feared all those years ago: Brits with brown faces. The biggest challenge facing the next generation of young Asians is how to become committed citizens in a modern Britain without forgetting everything about their past.