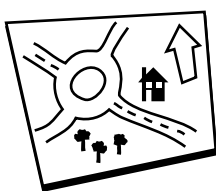


# ISLAM IN TRANSITION: RELIGION AND IDENTITY AMONG BRITISH PAKISTANI YOUTH

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## CONTEXT

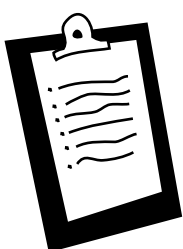


In this book Jacobson explores the importance of religion in shaping the identities of young British Pakistanis. Although Islam is a minority religion in Britain, it is a dynamic and successful one. This goes against expectation, for it has been widely assumed that in modern societies the institutions (including religion) that were sources of allegiance and authority in traditional societies inevitably decline. Jacobson was interested in Islam as an exception to the general pattern of secularisation. She chose to study British Pakistanis because they are the largest Muslim group in Britain today. She chose to study young people because she wanted to study the second generation, those who had been born and raised in Britain – and thus in an environment in which Islam was a minority religion.

Jacobson's main interest is in identity, and how this is shaped by religion. Her idea of identity is in the symbolic-interactionist tradition started by George Herbert Mead and developed by social psychologists such as Tajfel. Identity here is seen as shaped by interaction between the individual and society, with membership of social groups being an important element of this. Identity is about knowing you belong to a particular group, and the emotional significance of that membership. Identity is, however, not fixed and can vary between situations. The young British Pakistanis Jacobson studied faced what Rex and Josephides called 'identity options', choices between different sources of social identity.

As further background to her study, Jacobson also presents information on British Pakistanis and on the practice of Islam. There are probably between a million and a million and a half Muslims in Britain, about half of whom are Pakistani. Most are Sunni Muslims and follow the Barelvi or Deobandi traditions. About 65% of young Muslims in Britain say they attend a mosque at least once a week, compared with 80% of older respondents. In discussing findings from earlier research about how religion motivates young Pakistanis, Jacobson highlights four themes: the active interest in learning how to be a Muslim; the distinction between ethnicity and religion as sources of identity; the assertion of Muslim identity in protests such as those against the book *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie; and the development of radical or 'fundamentalist' approaches to Islam. These are followed up in the findings section.

## METHODS



The research was carried out over a period of a year in 1992–1993. The research used qualitative methods and took place in the Waltham Forest borough in the East End of London. Working in one area made it possible to relate the answers people gave in interviews to their social environment. Waltham Forest was chosen because of its large Pakistani population. It has the largest Pakistani population of any London borough (13,000, just over 6% of the borough's population is Pakistani). The Pakistani population of Waltham Forest is also broadly representative of British Pakistanis in terms of age structure and socio-economic status.

The main research method was semi-structured interviews. Respondents were identified using snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted with 33 young British Pakistanis, 18 female and 15 male. All were aged between 17 and 27, and over a half of them were under 20. Three of the boys and three of the girls were married and one of either sex had children. These 'core respondents' included four pairs of siblings, and so they were from 29 different families. Each interview lasted between an hour and two and a half hours. Jacobson used an interview schedule that contained questions covering the main concerns of the research: religion, identity and family and community. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and extracts from them are used throughout the book. Jacobson supplies details of the socio-economic and educational background of her respondents.

Before starting the interviews, she carried out a pilot study with students at the London School of Economics, where she was based while working on her doctoral thesis. The pilot study helped her to identify problems and to find appropriate ways of asking for the information she wanted.

Jacobson also used three additional research methods. First, she interviewed 30 other respondents informally. These were young people from the British Pakistani community in Waltham Forest and from the wider Asian or Muslim population; for example, she made notes of conversations with young men selling Islamic literature at social events. Second, she observed the life of the community through living there during the period of the research. For example, she visited a large number of social events and activities and approached many community organisations. Third, she discussed with 18 local 'community leaders' their views on the concerns of the research and about the younger generation. These supplementary methods enabled her to gain a greater understanding of how the ideas about identity that she heard in the main interviews translated into everyday social life. They also gave her considerable insight into the life of the Pakistani community. The main focus of the book, however, is on young people.

## KEY FINDINGS



Ethnicity is a difficult area of identity for young British Pakistanis. They have mixed feelings about seeing themselves as British because they are aware that for many people British means being white and having a British heritage. They feel they are bound to their parents' culture and to other Pakistanis; Pakistani ethnicity seems to be something they cannot escape from.

Yet religious identity is seen differently. Being a Muslim is seen as involving choice and having to be based on reflection, determination and education, and not something you are born into. This emphasis on personal choice is similar to that within Christianity and religious practice in the West in modern times, where it has led to fluid and changeable identities. Jacobson found no evidence for this; rather she found an emphasis on the individual combined with a strong belief in Islam. There is a very strong social boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims, arising from the nature of Islamic thought and the way it provides clear rules for how Muslims should live. Since the Qu'ran is seen as the word of God, the teachings of Islam are seen as unchanging. Thus Islam provides certainties for young people who face much uncertainty in other aspects of their lives, such as their ethnic identity. Jacobson argues that this is the strength of Islam's appeal to young people. Being a Muslim also involves identifying with a global community, unlike an Asian or Pakistani identity.

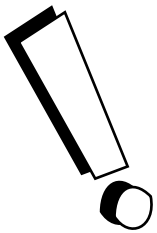
Jacobson's respondents behaved in ways that reinforced the distinctiveness of their Muslim identities. Even young Muslims who mix socially with non-Muslims tended to keep what Jacobson calls, 'psychological distance'. This construction of boundaries takes many forms, including the following.

- **Formal practices** such as observing Ramadan or attending a mosque
- **Routine behaviour** such as abstaining from alcohol and avoiding non-halal meat

- **General social conduct:** avoiding un-Islamic styles of behaviour such as dating and going to nightclubs
- **Attitudes:** beliefs rather than actions. This showed in the interviews in, for example, disapproval of *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie even among those who were not strongly committed to Islam.

The importance of these boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim did not, however, mean that young Muslims retreated into an exclusively Muslim social world (in the way that, for example, the Amish keep themselves separate from mainstream American society). The respondents expected and wanted to work, study and socialise outside as well as inside Muslim circles. The nature of Islam, Jacobson points out, does not encourage exclusivity; Islam is a global and politicised religion that seeks to win converts.

## IMPORTANCE



This research provides important insights into a complex and potentially controversial area. Many people claim to speak on behalf of minority ethnic groups; here young people from one group are allowed to speak for themselves. The respondents were British born, but facing a wide range of pressures and influences relating to their identities. Jacobson is able to show how ethnic, national and religious identities are related, and to demonstrate that Muslim identities are extremely powerful. Young British Muslims, faced with uncertainties in so many other areas of their lives, find a welcome stability and security in Muslim identities, which they consciously work toward rather than simply absorbing them through socialisation within their families. Islam is likely to continue to have a strong appeal for young people from Muslim backgrounds, and thus to be unaffected by the wider secularising trends in British society.

## EVALUATION



Jacobson herself identifies two aspects of her research that raise problems. These are representativeness and her status as an outsider.

With regard to representativeness, Jacobson is concerned that her sample may not have been typical of young British Pakistanis in Waltham Forest. She contacted her respondents through snowballing – one respondent suggesting possible others to her – and one consequence of this is that most of her respondents are students contacted through local colleges. There are two other groups she may have missed – those who had broken away from the community and young women from very conservative backgrounds who she was unable to talk to.

Her outsider status raised a number of practical problems. Although she preferred to interview people in their homes, to gain an insight into home life, most respondents lived with their parents, and the older generation were often suspicious of her and of her motives and this could cause difficulties. Where parents did not speak English, Jacobson could not easily reassure them.

'A two-hour interview with another male respondent, Zaheer, was conducted in the front room of his parents' terraced house while his father determinedly swept and swept again the small front yard; in order, or so I assumed, to keep an eye on the proceedings.' (p55)

Jacobson also felt that some respondents were not at ease when talking to her about their experiences of racism because they did not wish to offend her. There was also some suspicion as to why a non-Muslim should be gathering information on Muslims. Jacobson had to find ways of not letting it be assumed that she was thinking of converting to Islam while still encouraging respondents to talk about Islam. On the other hand, she felt that her outsider status was helpful in getting some respondents, especially girls, to talk openly; they felt more relaxed because they did not fear that what they said would be reported to their parents. Others seem to have enjoyed the chance to explain Islam to an outsider.

The relationship between religion and identity for British Pakistanis will change as the social, political, economic and religious context changes. Since Jacobson's research, there have been significant events both within Britain ('riots' in several towns in 2001) and beyond (the terrorist attack on the USA and the subsequent war against the Taliban in Afghanistan). These make it advisable to treat Jacobson's findings as a 'snapshot' of British Pakistanis at the time of the research.



## QUESTIONS

### KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

- 1 How many Muslims are there in Britain?
- 2 Why was Waltham Forest selected for this research?
- 3 What percentage of Waltham Forest's population are British Pakistanis?
- 4 What is meant by an 'interview schedule'?
- 5 In what ways did Jacobson find her pilot study helpful?
- 6 In what types of ways do young British Pakistanis maintain their Muslim identities?

### ANALYSIS

- 1 How important was it for this research that Jacobson was a white British non-Muslim woman?
- 2 What problems and issues might arise from the interviews in this research being carried out in the respondents' family homes?
- 3 Why might the respondents in this research not agree with Jacobson's description of them as 'British Pakistanis'?
- 4 Evaluate the significance of religion for young British Pakistanis.

**References** Rex and Josephides (1987) in *Immigrant Associations in Europe* edited by Rex, J, Joly, D and Wilpert, C, Gower, Aldershot