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The Rise of Islamic Radicalism Among British Bangladeshis

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This paper aims to examine the background and reasons for the rise of Islamic radicalism amongst British Bangladeshis. Islamic 'fundamentalism', anti-western sentiments and the politicisation of Islam have been dominant themes in the media and public consciousness in recent years. Why have Islam and western secular democracy come to be seen as irreconcilable enemies? Why do British citizens choose to prioritise or emphasise their Islamic identity over and against their British identity? Why are radical forms of political Islam attractive? These are questions that will be examined here.

This is not an exhaustive overview of either Bangladeshi migration to Britain or modern Islamic trends. It attempts to explain the relationships between migration, minorities and radical politics within the context of contemporary Britain and its Bangladeshi community. A brief history of the Bangladeshi community in Britain will be followed by a discussion of culture, hegemony and identity. An analysis of the changing identity of British Bangladeshis will touch on issues of exclusion and racism. These ideas will then be fitted into the wider context of Islam and Islamic radicalism in the world. An overview of politics and current affairs will also suggest some possible reasons for the rise of Islamic radicalism in the world and why it has become attractive to Bangladeshis in Britain.

British Bangladeshis

Most Muslims in Britain come from the Indian subcontinent, the majority from Pakistan, followed by Indian and Bangladeshi Muslims. Many Bangladeshis worked as sailors, and 'jumped ship', establishing small communities in major ports around the world in the 19th and early 20th centuries. These communities were largest in Britain due to the colonial ties and the possibilities of finding further employment on ships. They were centred in major ports such as London, Cardiff, South Shields and Sunderland (Carey and Shukur, 1985:406).

The majority of Bangladeshis came to Britain in the 1950 and 60s. The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act reinforced this pattern as friends and kin found it easier to be sponsored under the voucher system. These migrants at first saw themselves as temporary work migrants rather than settlers. They came in search of high wages rather than as a response to poverty (Carey and Shukur, 1985 and Gardner and Shukur, 1994:147). By the mid sixties family reunification in Britain began, first sons, then wives and other children slowly started to arrive (Carey and Shukur, 1985:407).

There are now approximately 300,000 British citizens of Bangladeshi origin, most of them in London. Most British Bangladeshis are from Sylhet, a region in the north east of Bangladesh, and the vast majority are Muslim. Bangladeshis and Bangladeshi culture have become a part of the dynamic 'British culture'. (Carey and Shukur, 1985:405). A look at some ways of understanding culture will help us analyse this process.

Changing Identities, Exclusion and Alienation

Muslims have become prominent in Britain and Europe in recent years. In Britain, there are over a million Muslims, but they have a presence in British consciousness beyond their numbers. Their prominence in the public arena has also been due to high profile political events. Within both the South Asian and Islamic communities in Britain and worldwide there is a diverse plurality, debates and conflicts that must be taken into account to avoid crude generalisation and essentialising.

The experience of migration and diaspora can lead to shifting notions of identity, the formation of new identities and hybrid identities. Experiences of racism and exclusion are also influential in identity formation and ethnic mobilization. Europe's Muslims suffer from various forms of socio-economic, political and physical exclusion, and many of them live in relative deprivation. Vertovec and Peach's picture of the situation of European Muslims is bleak. They are described as "*divided and traumatized, weakened by unemployment and humiliated by dependence on social welfare*". They suffer from anti-Islamism, harsh immigration regimes, and fear of persecution, along with economic problems such as unemployment. (Vertovec and Peach, 1997:5). In Britain, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis have the highest rates of unemployment, the lowest rates of educational qualifications and the highest profile in manual work of any 'non-white' group.

Simultaneously, claim Vertovec and Peach, there is a new self-consciousness amongst European Muslims. More Islamic organisations and associations have been formed, and this creates increasing engagement in politics and society (Vertovec and Peach, 1997:6). Perhaps this is due to the decrease in the strength of the 'myth of return' and an increasing feeling of permanence. Perhaps it is a second-generation effect, with the greater confidence and feeling of belonging in the hybrid identities of the second generation. Vertovec and Peach identify changes in Islam in Europe (ibid:9), which some say are part of a 'politics of difference' and anti-racism. Others, they say, claim it is part of a 'worldwide Islamic awakening (ibid:10).

There is certainly a group of European and British Muslims who are attracted to Islamic radicalism (Gardner and Shukur, 1994:161). This group emphasise their Muslim identity over other political and cultural identities (Gardner and Shukur, 1994:163). Young Muslims reclaim Islam for themselves, "*choosing to break away culturally on the basis of communal identity from the dominant values of the nations of which they are citizens in principle, but from which according to them, they are excluded in practice*". They struggle against exclusion, racism, drug addiction, violence and delinquency; strict respect for religious prohibition is therefore important for them (Vertovec and Peach, 1997:52).

The first generation of Bangladeshis were more attached to their national identity as Bangladeshis, than the second who are more attracted to Islam (Gardner and Shukur, 1994:163). Many second generation Bangladeshis do not feel a strong bond with Bangladesh. On visits home they feel and emphasise their British identity. They feel out of place and alienated (ibid:159). The draw of Islam may be stronger amongst those who feel little association with either a racist British society or with Bangladesh (ibid:162).

The majority of European Muslims are politically moderate, not very religious, or practice their religion individually. They are often overlooked (Vertovec and Peach, 1997:38), by right wing analysts or the 'Clash of Civilisations' school of thought. Most Muslims take the view that outside Islamic countries, they are under a political obligation to live as responsible citizens of the society in which they find themselves. Taher echoes this in his analysis of British Asian attitudes towards the British Government, in his article 'Goodness gracious me, 3m Asian loyal to Britain', for The Guardian (May 2000), he reports, "*most Asians condemn those youths fighting for the Taliban as much as anyone else in this country. Our survey showed that 72% thought that it was wrong for Muslim youths to fight for the Taliban.*" It is important to remember this quiet and peaceful majority when discussing an infamous and high profile minority.

Islamic Fundamentalism

Islamic fundamentalism is an over-used and misunderstood term, used to describe various militant currents in contemporary Islamic thought. Youssef Choueiri identifies three currents of 'Islamic fundamentalism'. 'Revivalism' emerged as an internal dialogue within Islam in the eighteenth century. It grew from remote rural areas beyond the reach of authorities. Its most famous manifestation is now in 'Wahabism' in Saudi Arabia (Choueiri, 1990:9). Islamic reformism was an urban movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its intellectual leaders studied European success and dominance, in an attempt to reverse what they saw as 'Islamic decline' (ibid.).

Islamic radicalism has emerged in the twentieth century as a reaction to the growth of the nation state. It is popular amongst migrants, both internationally and internally in the great era of urbanization. Islamic "*radicalism does not revive or reform. Rather it creates a new world and creates its own dystopia.*" (ibid:10). Islamic radicalism is the focus of this paper, as it is the most recent, relevant type of Islamic fundamentalism, and relates most closely with the general public usage of the term.

Islamic radicalism reflects, and is a response to, the social divisions and problems of Islamic cities. The rise of Islamic radicalism is linked with the growth of cities since 1945; it is linked to the anxieties and ambitions of certain groups in society. Choueiri identifies these as; small merchants, middle traders, artisans, students, teachers and civil servants (ibid:12). Many of these people are migrants, either internally in processes of urbanization or internationally, as in the case of British Bangladeshis.

The messages of Islamic radicalism are stridently anti-western. Scholars such as Maududi (1992) (founder of the Jammāt-I-Islami movement in South Asia) and Qutb offer convincing and coherent criticism of secular democracy and 'western' values and politics. They eloquently

criticize socialism, capitalism, colonialism, secular democracy and the ‘pagan materialism’ (jahiliyya-madiyya) of the west (ibid:95). Their arguments are compelling and many of them overlap with those of European movements, such as anti-capitalism.

Maududi and Qutbs’ political ideas are bound up in the all importance of Islam and Allah in society. “*Sovereignty and legitimacy are unassailably placed beyond the realm of human endeavour*”, Secularism and democracy are seen as a usurpation of Allah’s sovereignty (Choueiri, 1990:105). Democracy is therefore, a direct violation of divine laws and a reversion to the days of pagan ignorance (Jahiliyya), secularism meanwhile, is said to lead to corruption, oppression and treachery (ibid, 1990:106). “*For Maududi the idea of social justice is a stratagem of Satan to intrigue humans*” (ibid.116). Maududi and Qutb do entertain some ideas that seem ridiculous or racist to a secular European scholar. The Zionist and Christian conspiracies, planning to undermine Islam or rid the world of spirituality all together are examples (ibid:107). The association of Jews with Capitalism and usury is a recurring theme, as is the idea that Communism is also a Jewish plot (ibid:119).

These types of radical ideas have reached Britain and the most angry and violent strains of Islamic radicalism are being preached here. ‘Dirty Kuffar’, the violent ‘jihad rap’ song released on the Internet and distributed through mosques, reported by Barnett, (2004) demonstrated the depths of hatred that exist. Gardner and Shukur point out that a “*heightened commitment to Islam, allows those involved both to express their frustrations with mainstream British society and to join a worldwide trend which links them politically and financially to global ummah*” (Gardner and Shukur, 1994:163), Gardner and Shukur point to the role of transnational communities and diaspora in the formation and construction of new currents within Islam. The effect of these linkages has been to increase the importance of events throughout the Muslim world on communities outside it. Solidarity with Muslims in other countries and a Global worldview are also features of this (Gardner and Shukur, 1994:163). These new forms of Islam see Islam as a ‘total’ political system. The continual comparison and interaction with the west has led to change, hybridity, and ambivalence in both Islam and ‘the West’.

The Effect of Politics

Political events have played a crucial role in the formation and popularity of Islamic radicalism and other currents in Islam. A series of events and controversies from the eighties until today has stimulated and maintained the strength and appeal of Islamic radicalism and other forms of political Islam. Influenced by the ideas of Bernhard Lewis, Samuel Huntington wrote the now famous ‘Clash of Civilisations’ (1993). He predicted that “*the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural*”. He also states that economic modernization and social change are separating people from local identities. He goes on to say that these forces also weaken the nation state as a source of identity. Which also contradicts the more ‘liberal’ scholars cited above on this topic. He claims that religion has filled this gap in many parts of the world, often in the form of movements that are labeled ‘fundamentalist’ (Huntington, 1993). Huntington points the finger of blame for this conflict firmly at Islam, claiming that “Islam has bloody borders”. Due to this aggression, he maintains,

'the West' must strengthen and protect itself and its dominance by limiting the military and economic strength of the Muslim world (Huntington 1993).

The article led to a war of words between right wing and liberal scholars. Edward Said responded to Huntington's article with "*The Clash of Ignorance*" (2001). He points out that Huntington and Lewis do not acknowledge the internal dynamics and plurality of every 'civilization'. Terms like 'the west' and 'Islam' are too simplistic. He balances criticism of 'Islamic fundamentalists' by pointing out similar distortions and zealotry in "Jewish" and "Christian" religious and political discourse. Said wisely concludes that "*it is better to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities, the secular politics of reason and ignorance, and universal principles of justice and injustice*". (Said, 2001).

It is interesting to note that Maududi and Qutb subscribe to similar ideas about the total incompatibility of western secularism and Islam as Huntington does. The similarities in these simplistic notions and inflammatory rhetoric are indicative of the political motivations of their intellectual work and their extremist worldviews.

Recent history in the Middle East reinforces antagonism between the Muslim World and the Anglo-American hegemony. Peter Beaumont's article, '*The Roots of Muslim Anger*' for the Observer offers a good analysis of this. He identifies Anglo-American attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq and support for Israel as specific grievances. He finds that internal conflicts within the Islamic world are influential and less obvious (Beaumont, 2001). Beaumont cites Professor Abdul Sattar Kassem, a lecturer in political science at the University of Nablus, "*What you have to understand is that many Arabs and Muslims want to build an Islamic civilization in its own right. They blame the West in general – and America in particular – for subjugating that ambition by dividing the Arab world through the dictators that American supports. America has done this by fragmenting the Islamic world, dividing it under rulers it supports. America has perverted the attempts to democratize the Arab world. They are hypocrites. They preach freedom and democracy, but prevent Arabs from enjoying it and exploit their wealth. The final issue is the US support for Israel in tormenting the Palestinians*". (Beaumont, 2001).

These sentiments are common in the Muslim world and beyond. However, Beaumont identifies other sources of rancour. Hazem Saghiyeh, a London-based columnist for the Arabic newspaper Al Hayat, identifies some of the same causes of friction as Professor Kassem, but spreads the blame for the problem more widely. The failure of 'the Islamic project' on issues such as governance and modernization are also crucial factors. This sense of failure has fostered a historic sense of inferiority at Europe's dominance of the world since the nineteenth century. This is part of the continuous process of self-evaluation with respect to 'the other', identified by Hall, Cohen and Said. Feelings of inferiority are coupled with the demographic factors of urbanization and unequal development. "*These are... people who have lost their traditional ways of life but have not become modern, who have not benefited through all their education. It is a recipe for psychological breakdown and hysteria. In the past two decades that gap of expectation has increasingly been filled by the politicization of Islam and Islamic fundamentalism*" (ibid.).

Deep divisions in the Islamic world itself accompanied the crisis of the nineteenth century. These divided those who argued for reform, modernization or 'an Islamic Enlightenment' and those

arguing for Islamic fundamentalism (ibid.). These factors were exacerbated in 1948 when Israel defeated Arab armies. The Military defeats, underdevelopment, lack of democracy and freedom of expression led to the rise of conspiracy theories (ibid.). Theories like those of Maududi and Qutb, blaming America of Jews for their feelings of powerlessness and alienation.

Opportunistic leaders such as Ayatollah Khomeini and Bin Laden understand and manipulate these feelings. Many of the poor and disillusioned see the ideas of Islamic radicalism as a magic solution to their problems (ibid.). In 'the West', similar discourse create hatred and fear, from the cultural racism of "orientalism" and the "Clash of Civilisations" through to the self-fulfilling prophecy of "Islamophobia".

Conclusions

The huge inequalities in the world and the injustice of the 'new world order' have created a platform for radical and often violent movements to prosper. The seemingly unassailable empire of American capitalism and western culture are being attacked. They have spawned many cultures of resistance, and among the fiercest, and most attractive is Islamic radicalism.

There are large diverse Muslim communities in many Western countries. These migrations and the improvements in global communications, have led to the creation of new, hybrid cultures. The identities of second generation Bangladeshis living in Britain are changing. Over time, with the mixing and inter-actions of different cultures, through the experiences of migration, minority, and exclusion, new identities and cultures are formed and chosen. New links and networks have grown up and Islam has assumed a growing importance as a unifying force for many oppressed people around the world.

British Bangladeshis may reject British society for any number of reasons. Poverty, exclusion, racism, or the British government foreign policies, which kill or support the killing of thousands of Muslims every year. Islamic radicalism is one of many paths they could take in response, which for reasons outlined above, is particularly attractive at the moment. The rise of Islamic radicalism has a range of global causes, and its popularity among British Bangladeshis is due to the interaction of local factors with global politics. We must remember, however that we are all responsible for the spread of the politics of hate, as it is a response to repression, exclusion, and hopelessness.

As Jason Burke points out in his book 'Al-Qaeda', "The greatest weapons in the war on terrorism is the courage, decency, humour and integrity of the vast proportion of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims. It is this that is restricting the spread of al-Qaeda, not the activities of counter-terrorism experts. Without it, we are lost. There is indeed a battle between the west and men like Bin Laden. But it is not a battle between the west and men like Bin Laden. But it is not a battle for global supremacy. It is a battle for hearts and minds. And it is a battle that we, and our allies in the Muslim world, are currently losing." (cited in Dalrymple, 2004).

Courtesy: *Udbastu, The Uprooted*, Issue 28, April-June 2004

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