

Past and present gender dilemma and its role in shaping the future of South Asian women in a southern county of the United Kingdom- An ethnographic study

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the social situation based on gender dilemma of South Asian women who migrated in Buckinghamshire, UK during 1960 and 1990 with their husbands or parents. The research also tries to find out the views of second generation South Asian girls who are born in Buckinghamshire during the study time and how childhood gender conflicts is still affecting their lives.

A participatory research based study was made engaging twenty-six Asian women aged between 22 and 85 and from Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Nepali and African Asian background. Participants are from different social and professional background and living in three major towns of Buckinghamshire.

The paper is an attempt to outline the gender conflicts within South Asian communities and their journey through it. How it differs between generations and how young generations cope with the differences. This study also focuses on the childhood of young Asian girls after coming to a new country including the tensions between growing up in the UK and traditional expectations of gender role and responsibilities, what are the problems they encountered while growing up in a new country including cultural barriers, linguistic barrier among their parents. It also reveals second-generation's experience while growing up, how they are integrating with wider society and what are the expectations from their own community as well as from wider community.

The paper brings out new significance of old age barriers and gender conflicts.

Key words: Migration; gender conflict; cultural tension; identity; South Asian women

Introduction: The Asian or Asian British population are the second largest ethnic community after the majority, White British in 2011¹. For the last one decade, the country has become more diverse with rising population of ethnic minority communities. Migration and its consequences play the major role in migrants' life for a few generations. This paper focuses on the social situation based on gender dilemma for generations which is closely related to their migration pattern among the South Asian women in a southern county of the United Kingdom (UK). An ethnographic study among South Asian women was made in 2013 in Buckinghamshire which is located in the southern part of the UK. The work is also an attempt to find out how South Asian women are defining their identity for generations in

¹ 2011 Census analysis: Ethnicity and religion of the non-UK born population in England and Wales: 2011(2015), Office of National Statistics

the study area. As Brubaker and Cooper suggested (2000) 'Identity is something that all people have, seek, construct and negotiate' it is evident in works of other researchers as well. Bugg (2014) researched about negotiating the identity among migrant Hindu women in Sydney while Guzder and Krishnan (2005), Choudhry (2001) discussed the same issue in North American and Canadian perspective. Past works of British social researcher demonstrated that not only the first generations are met with the challenges with migration, the second generation Asian women had to encounter the aftermath of migration and social expectation in Britain as well (Anwar, 1998, Dwyer 2000, Dhaliwal and Kangis, 2006). According to Choudhry (2001) 'As participants could not manage resettlement on their own, personal independence was not very important' for South Asian immigrant women. However, this study reveals that idea of personal independence is a result of tradition, belief and need among the participants of this research. To understand the change of situation in gender identity, one needs to understand the migration pattern based on which identity of Asian women was established in Buckinghamshire, UK. Their journey set in 1956, when Mohammed Hamim Mirza, arrived in High Wycombe² as the first ever Pakistani man in Buckinghamshire. In the 1950s most Indian migrant workers arrived in Britain were Sikhs from the rural areas of the Punjab, and Pakistani immigrant came from Mirpur areas of Azad Kashmir (Ballard 1983). The partition of Punjab and Kashmir between India and Pakistan had created immense pressure on land resources during the 1950s and 1960s, greatly increasing such emigration from then on. Factory location and demand for man power mainly attracted migration of young men from South Asian countries to this rural county of Buckinghamshire from mid-1950s (Stevenson, Watt, Kehoe and Chappell 1996). Migrant labour was a far cheaper way of meeting the demand for labour than other alternatives (Brown 1995). Before 1962 the Commonwealth Immigration Act allowed commonwealth citizens to enter the UK freely. The introduction of the 'Work voucher' system³ also aided the movements of unskilled labourers from the Indian subcontinent by allowing those who were already in Britain to arrange jobs and vouchers for their relatives and friends. Nearly all of them came to Britain with the intention of staying only temporarily, as Ballard (1990) mentioned them as 'international commuters' periodically returning to their homeland taking a break from factory works. As the demand for labour continued to drop during the 1960s most of these temporary migrants were gradually transformed into permanent settlers. Around late 1960s these men started to bring their family from their homeland to settle in Aylesbury, High Wycombe and Chesham. Women who entered this time either with their husband or as a girl with their parents became the first generation South Asian women migrants of Buckinghamshire. Majority of these migrated women were from rural areas of the Indian subcontinent moreover, this migration pattern made them 'veiled creature' (Khan 1976, Ali 1992). Later migrants and very recent educated South Asian migrant women also face shifts of identity and dilemmas of liminality that take place after arrival (Pandurang 2003). South Asian women became one of the major subject in social research in Post-colonial era in UK by the distinguished works of Khan (1977), Parmar (1982), Brah (1998), Ali (1992), Dwyer (2000) and Raghuram (2003) where South Asian diasporas are

² Chaudhri.A (1988), *Home to Home – A History of Asians in High Wycombe*, Buckinghamshire County Council, Pages 3 – 49

³ The Cabinet Papers 1915 – 1988, National Archive, UK

challenging stereotyped ideas of 'passive Asian women'. However, Buckinghamshire represents a rural county where South Asian women are still termed as seldom heard voices who hardly challenge the issues they face inside and outside their community. This study is bringing new significance of age-old gender issues among different generations and groups in a rural setting.

Methodology:

Participatory research model was chosen to conduct the study as part of ethnographic research. As Russo (2012) suggested, the participants bring their experience and everyday knowledge which help researchers gain new insights into the subject. Participants who belong to the first and second generations from three towns namely Aylesbury, High Wycombe and Chesham⁴ were invited to take part in this study. Qualitative data was generated through individual and focus group interviews. Participants aged above 18 were requested to take part and twenty-six participants aged between twenty and eighty-five finally took part forming four groups of the research study. Origin of the participants varied from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and African countries mainly Kenya and Uganda. Social background of the contributors was wide ranging from Mayors of two major towns of Buckinghamshire, teachers, doctors, nurse, supermarket employee, restaurant employee, social worker, council employee, home-maker, student and pensioner.

“Participatory research requires a great willingness on the part of participants to disclose their personal views of the situation, their own opinions and experiences. In everyday life, such openness is displayed towards good and trusted friends, but hardly in institutional settings or towards strangers” (Gallett 2013). Language and culture become the dominant issues while researching with the ethnic minority community. When the researcher comes from the same ethnic background then the challenge becomes comparatively less as the use of same language makes researcher more acceptable than other 'outsider researcher'. Bowes and Dar (2000) recognised the importance of shared cultural background between the interviewee and interviewer to build up the trust. Consent was requested from each individual participant after several visits and more than sixty individuals were approached from different groups of Asian background. Variation of response to participation which closely related to their land of origin was also noticed in three towns. Pakistani women who are from Mirpur area now living in Chesham were more approachable than Pakistani women in High Wycombe and Aylesbury. Pakistani women coming from Peshawar and surrounding areas were the hardest community to reach for this research. Their main concern was upsetting their men and they were scared of their safety. On the contrary African Asian origin and Indian origin women eagerly participated in the study and willingly told their 'own stories'. Second generation British born women who belong to the fourth group were easiest to include in the research as they are familiar with academic research and recognised the importance of this study. Participants were divided into four groups according to the nature of migration and

⁴ Residents from non-white ethnic groups tend to be living in the urban areas of High Wycombe, Aylesbury and Chesham. Source: 1991 Census, County Report for Buckinghamshire

generation. First group of participants are women who arrived in Buckinghamshire during 1960 and 1990 either alone or with their husband to settle in the UK. Second group of participants are the women who arrived during the same time but as young girls with their parents and had education in UK. Third group consists of women who migrated after 1990 till 2012. Fourth group participants are the young British-born women. Individual face to face interviews and focus group interviews were made to capture data. A semi-structured questionnaire with open ended questions was used for the interviews which give the respondents flexibility of how much they want to be exposed to the researcher. Among these four groups, many of the participants from the first group had severe language barriers and mostly speak in their native languages. They belong to the hard-to-reach group. Language barriers were also noticed in the third group though they are the late migrants. In a qualitative study, language differences may occur in the first phase while working with immigrants (VanNes, Abma, Jonsson and Eur 2010). In this study use of their native language was one of the determinants of the interview. Apart from English other languages used in this research were Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi and Nepali. It was evident from the interview experience that the participants felt confident while talking in their mother language on their childhood experiences and family issues but the same people fluently spoke in English while talking about their work life. Interviews were recorded in audio and video format to produce a digital ethnographic report. Consent was asked from each participant regarding capturing their voices and faces. Participants were uneasy about the recording at the beginning but they became comfortable within few minutes with the trusted researcher and confidentiality was maintained throughout. After recording researcher immediately showed the interviewee the captured data and their opinion was asked about removing any unwanted parts. Only two participants asked to delete some parts. But this process of research gave them confidence and helped to raise self-esteem in return.

Research and discussion:

Four groups of participants based on migration pattern and generations were chosen for this study. This study finds out that social status of the study groups was very much related to the gender expectation and social norms of being Asian women. Traditional role of women and expectation from female members of the South Asian family in Buckinghamshire echo the socio-economic role division of the Indian subcontinent where women stay at home and run the family and men earn for the family.

First group: Traditional gender identity was evident in maximum levels among the first group of participants who entered in Buckinghamshire, UK during the last half of the past century. The reason behind the migration of the first group of respondents was to join their husbands who were living in the UK for a couple of years alone. Women first started to enter few years later than their counterpart, only after the male members of the family decided to settle in the new country. These young women either new brides or first time mothers, had no choice but to follow their husbands into an unknown world. First group respondents recalled their disappointments of coming to a country which was completely different from their homeland.

'I had so many dreams while coming from Pakistan. When I arrived here then only realised its different life here. My life started to move backward from that point of time'.

The above statement actually tells the story of many like her who belongs to the same group. They lived a happy life in their homeland with extended family members and relatives. In South Asia the ideal household in the rural areas is a multigenerational unit (Vatuk 1972). Relationships within the household are formally shaped by a hierarchy of gender, age, and status (Shaw 2004). Gender roles were already defined for the women where house chores are managed by them. However women never tended to question their dependency as they were happy to work along with other female members of the family. Concept of dependency provides the link between material organisation of the household and the ideology of the family (Carby 1996). When these women migrated to the UK they carried the same female focused concepts of 'honour', veils and economic dependence on male members. Cold climate, unknown environment, industrial setup and culture difference made them house bound. Language was another major factor, because of which, this group never felt confident of going out and speaking to their neighbours.

'I felt so sad after leaving all the relatives and didn't like staying alone'

Above comment reflects some feelings of first group members who survived by only staying inside the home for years. Six respondents mentioned the struggle of raising children alone whereas elderly members of the family always helped with kids when women were busy in the house back in their homeland. One participant recalled her days in a hospital, accompanying her son for three days without any food as she was unable to express her hunger to hospital staffs. Men worked day and night in the factories to earn enough money for the family. So women never got any support from men in child care. Moreover, South Asian men became very concerned about losing their culture and tradition while living in a western country. They set some restrictions for the women. Respondents, who are Pakistani origin, were only allowed to go to their child's school apart from visiting doctors or hospitals. All the respondents described their journey in the UK as 'Home to airport-airport to home.' Some of the experience respondents shared reveals the expectation from them.

'My husband was settled here before. I had no idea about his mentality and values. He used to say - Don't talk to others. Don't go outside, don't meet others – I never encountered this sort of restriction before in my homeland.'

Men also threatened in many cases of sending women back to the homeland if they did not listen to their husbands. Women always feared of going back as they knew even their parents will not welcome them. As Ali (1992) pointed out aptly 'Domestic violence, even, may be tolerated because the prospect of rejection - not by one man, but by one's whole social world'. Hence this first group of participants had to face oppression inside their own family and community and became isolated.

'I could only go to see doctors, or hospital to give birth or when I needed to buy my underwear then only I went to market. My house in High Wycombe was everything

to me. So my journey was High Wycombe to airport – going back to show the babies to his family and my family – coming back from airport to home.’

The particular ways in which a male community ‘leadership’ has sought to ossify culture and ethnicity have suppressed and denied women’s difference, making invisibly a safe but ambivalent position for South Asian women (Ali 1992). However within the first group there were a number of respondents whose experience were strikingly different from the above. In 1967 a number of Kenyan Asian who held British Passport were exempt from the 1968 Immigration Act and therefore entitled to enter Britain⁵. During 1972 thousands of Ugandan Asian entered the UK due to the Uganda crisis (Brah 1987). Many of these families settled in Aylesbury during the first half of the 1970s.

‘We came with only fifty-five pounds in hand, had to leave all belongings in Uganda. We came here, worked hard and managed our life.’

The above statement from the oldest participant of the study who migrated in Buckinghamshire from Uganda in 1972 echoes the life of many women who entered in UK during the same time either with family or alone. Women like her never faced any restriction from their family and community. They proudly worked alongside with the men to keep their family running. African Asian women had more freedom of mixing with the outside community and choosing their professional life. Their migration pattern of coming to the UK for political reasons while leaving their professional life back home, made them eager to work. Parmar’s (1982) study finds out a combination of reasons on women doing paid work such as ‘desire for better environment, increase in the cost of living and the desire to be independent.’

Second group:

‘Going to school was always difficult – as an Asian girl you mean to do house work, cooking, cleaning. Mum never got the concept I have to read, do homework’

‘I am probably amongst the hundreds of my generation who went through the same thing where parents forgot I am actually only a child. I instantly became another support for them, another shoulder to lean on.’

The above comments made by second group of participants bring two different views on their non-working and working mothers thus exploring the era from a third point of view. These participants now in their 40s and 50s migrated with their parents as young children between 1960 and 1990. Expectation from a girl child is very clear in those comments where girls were expected to share house chores and taking care of younger siblings. Childhood was very difficult for this group of women who started to get education in the British system and had to follow their mothers at home. This group recalled that coming to the UK made them instant teenagers and had no time for playing or making friends. They also became house bound like their mothers. Gender roles were so clear to the parents of Asian communities that they never expected their girl child to excel in school. Majority of the second group

⁵ The Cabinet Papers 1915 – 1988, National Archive, UK

respondents recalled the struggle of going to school, finding time to finish homework and study. They never got any encouragement for doing well in their studies as child moreover, they had to face a lot of struggle to get higher education.

‘It was very difficult time – you are trying to please your parent as Asian because your culture said you must-then you are trying to fit in the school.’

Participants of this group had to strictly follow Asian tradition at home while getting education in British system. The expectation from a girl is different in two cultures. It created a conflict of aspiration among them as their parents wanted them to get married as soon as they became 18 and follow the life of woman by staying home and caring for others while British system taught them to become independent. Conflict between tradition and personal aspiration was clear among the second group participants. However young girls accepted arranged marriage as they were groomed in eastern tradition where ‘children respect their elders without question’.

‘Whether I was ready to get married that was irrelevant at that time. I did not want to get married. I thought I had more potential of doing well with my education. But it was time for getting married in their (parents) eyes.’

The pressure of early marriage also came from extended family members. Young girls had to choose their family belief before themselves where her action will be an example to her siblings, cousin brothers and sisters. From very early age South Asian girls realised that they are carrying the flag of honour of the family and she will never let parents down for her own sake. This following comment actually sums up the feeling of second group in their time growing up.

‘Growing up in the UK for me I suppose in a way seems silly but battles are being with the family, within the community – they don’t let you integrate. Identity crisis does become an issue.’

Third group:

South Asian women who migrated into the UK after 1990 till 2012 and living in the study area are part of the third group. They also belong to the first generation migrants in the UK but migration patterns and technological advancements make this group different from the first and second group.

‘I get my daily dose from Facebook to keep in touch with my sister, relatives and friends from India’

‘We now have skype – so I can speak to my brothers almost every day through skype’

Migration in the era of communication made the life of third group participants easy and less isolated in a new country. According to the "Statement of Changes" in the migration rule (March 1990) only skilled personnel can enter and settle with valid work permit. Majority of the group members are either Graduate or have higher qualification who accompanied their

husbands during the said time. Gender dilemma was less evident among this group of participants. Few of them had left their successful profession in their homeland to settle in UK. Expectation from the new country was clearer though all the educated members struggled to get decent employment in the UK. Pandurang (2003) nicely brought up the issue of 'new dependency' because of Visa technicalities which creates complex material and emotional problems with their expectation from the new country 'especially since popular media images of the West cast it as a liberating space for women'.

Exception also observed among the participants of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin. They are the daughter-in-law of the first group members who wanted '*Desi*' (from homeland) bride for their sons. Ideally in the Indian subcontinent a bride goes to live in her husband's parents' household, under the authority of her mother-in-law, and is formally subordinate to her husband (Shaw 2004). Prospects of the young migrant as daughter in laws always in rise as elderly women hope that they (newly married bride) will be out of influence of western culture and her authority and reign in the family will remain. Hence some of the respondents of this category are spending the same life as their mother-in-law spent sixty years before. Only difference is brought by the advancement of technology as they can talk to their relatives and friends easily through mobiles, Facebook and Skype which made them feel connected with their loved ones.

Fourth group:

'Our generation is completely different from our parents. They only had to survive.'

The above comment is from a second generation British born young girl who belongs to the fourth group of this study. Girls who are born and raised in Buckinghamshire experience the highest amount of identity crisis. Second generation participants all are graduate from UK universities and in their first job during the study time. Yet they are brought up in eastern tradition and highly influenced by family culture where women have certain defined role to play. However 'the younger generation feel more in tune with the wider population in the new country than with the childhood experiences of their parents (Dhaliwal and Kangis 2006).

'When I was at school, I could associate with all children but when Ramadan comes by I will be asked question why we are different that's when I started to question myself and to my parents.'

'When my parents came to this country they brought along the same understanding that women should understand their role as a wife and mother and they shouldn't take it further. These values passed down through generations –supressing the second generation. It's a severe psychological effect!'

Both the comments reveal that this generation is going through constant conflict of identity, belief and tradition. Peer groups, media and education encouraged the quest for independence and ambition of professional life while 'the prevailing culture was linked to that of their parents, fostering notions of duty, respect and, for women in particular, passivity' (Dhaliwal and Kangis 2006).

‘We not only expected to be young British women but we also expected to be Muslim and then there is a cultural aspect of Pakistani – which doesn’t marry up-and you have your other side of being professional’

‘We have been brought up in the society where we have the eastern upbringing but we are in a western society – these two sometimes clash.’

Dwyer (2000) defined the second generations as ‘new diasporas’ who contradict the claim of being labelled as Indian or Pakistani but also negotiate the expectation from their parents that they should maintain a strong connection with their homeland. Fourth group members of the study are belong to this new diasporas who are torn between two distinct cultures while trying to negotiate between eastern tradition within western society. They are offering an insider’s view of what it is to be a female in a multicultural setting by focusing on process of translating between cultures and renegotiating traditions (Pandurang 2003).

Conclusion: South Asian women are generally branded as housewives who hardly speak English and mostly house bounds. Family, reproduction and caring were only expected from them in the patriarchal community especially during the first decade of their staying in the UK. Hence South Asian women workers were almost invisible in British economy before 1970. With the entry of Ugandan Asians in 1972 the situation changed suddenly. Buckinghamshire also reflects the same. Before the African Asian migration, there were only a few working class women in the study area in 1960s⁶. Parmar (1982) pointed out many factors which prevented Asian women from taking a regular job. Difficulties in accessing day care provision, less access to subsidized or free services and finding child minders as white minders refused to take black children. Lack of affordable childcare and language skills are other factors which made first group participants more dependent on their male counterpart. 'Report of the working party' (1984) revealed that women from Pakistan and Bangladesh were the least likely to be economically active⁷.

This study finds out that second group members had defined gender identity for them in spite of having a difficult childhood and struggle to get their dream fulfilled. Members of this group became mayors, teachers, social workers, doctors and nurses. They fought for their rights and made gender rule for themselves. Future aspiration among third group participants varies in different communities. All the educated members of this group are working either in supermarkets, schools or in restaurants. The frustration of working in lower grade workplace was clear among them, still they are managing their own finance and have same rights to take decisions on family matters. But few others who belong to Pakistani community and Bangladeshi community have no bank accounts and hardly mix with outside community. They are completing the circle where their mother in laws started sixty years before. Lastly second generation members came out to be the most determined group among four groups though they are living with constant identity crisis. This second generation South Asian

⁶ Report of the Working Party, (1984) Ethnic Minorities and the Social Service Department, Bucks Social Services

⁷ Report of the Working Party, (1984) Ethnic Minorities and the Social Service Department, Buckinghamshire Social Services

women are the face of the community as they dreamt of a more cohesive society where they can be proud of 'where they are, who they are and their skin colour'.

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