

Islam in Britain: Identity Issues Facing British Muslim Men of South Asian Origin

Abstract

Short Description

An examination of identity challenges and issues facing British Muslims of South Asian origin in contemporary society.

Long Description

This paper explores identity issues facing British-born Muslims and examines the interrelationships between British identity, culture and religious devotion amongst British men of South Asian origin. The paper is divided into three parts. Firstly an overview of key literature is given. This is followed by two qualitative surveys; one on allegiances to national sports teams among British Muslim men of South Asian origin, the other on contemporary issues facing the same group.

The findings of the survey revealed religious conviction, loyalty to Muslim countries, a desire for unity amongst Muslims from different cultural and sectarian groups in Britain, disdain and mistrust of those responsible for the portrayal of Muslim minorities living in Britain including the media and a want for the

abandonment of South Asian cultural practices which conflict with Islamic teachings.

Keywords

Religion, Islam, Muslim, Britain, British, Identity, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, South-Asia

Introduction

A review of extant literature reveals that a coherent and unifying force does not exist in defining British Islam and that sectarian division and cultural allegiances have, and continue to be, the defining characteristic of British Muslims. Furthermore, loyalty to one's motherland continues to play a strong part in identifying first generation British-born Muslims.

The study of identity in its broad context deals with religion, ethnicity, custom and class. It has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, largely due to a shift in paradigm, from considering identity in 'fixed and settled terms' to its contemporary understanding as being 'malleable and constantly shaped by the changing context'¹.

In the context of Muslims living in Britain, it is agreed that the social and religious challenges to this community are extremely broad and difficult to navigate successfully. Marriage and the role of women², the origin and education of Imams³, the role of religious leaders⁴, the dichotomy between tradition and religion⁵, fundamentalist terrorism and Islamophobia⁶, education⁷, employment, Islamic schools⁸, the *hijab*, sectarian division⁹, allegiance to the motherland over loyalty to Britain¹⁰, interfaith dialogue¹¹, global politics¹², the Rushdie affair¹³, 9-11¹⁴, 7-7¹⁵, Islamic revivalism¹⁶ and priorities facing the Muslim *Ummah* [nation]¹⁷, are all part and parcel of the obstacles and discourse amongst Muslims living in Britain.

The emergence of a Muslim identity in Britain

Religious identity amongst minorities can be envisaged in three ways; as an ascribed identity; as a chosen identity; and as a declared identity. It is not fixed, but rather 'evolves', such that identity theory tries to relate the individual perception of one's

own identity into the construct of a broader social context¹⁸ and understand change over a span of time. This evolution from social, political and religious perspectives is described by Esposito¹⁹ in the context of assimilation, acculturation, integration and multiculturalism. In addition, modernization theory purports that religious identity allows for the distinction between traditional and modern societies, where, in traditional societies, religion is a cohesive force and its value system is unquestioned as a consequence of its sacredness²⁰. The identity of Muslims living in Britain has certainly evolved, though it is debatable to what extent this evolution could be dubbed as modernization^{21 22}.

Prior to the First World War, most Muslim settlers to Britain were seamen employed by the merchant navy. They were mainly settled in east London, Liverpool and Woking in Surrey, where the first purpose-built place of worship for Muslims in Britain, the Shah Jahan Mosque, was built in 1889²³. These were predominantly from the Indian subcontinent through activities of the East India Company.

Later, Yemeni citizens began arriving to Britain as merchants, in large part due to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Today, their offspring are predominantly still located in areas such as Cardiff and Hull²⁴ and, after spreading inland, forming social groups in Sheffield and Birmingham²⁵. The Yemenis are thus regarded as the first Muslim group to achieve social cohesion and stability within Britain as a consequence of religious organization²⁶.

Well-known to those interested in the history of Islam in Britain are a few noteworthy native English converts to Islam. Amongst them was W.H.Quillam who became Muslim in 1887. He was proactive in the propagation of Islam in England, publishing the Crescent, a weekly digest on issues pertaining to Islam²⁷. In more

recent decades, the presence of Muslims in Britain bore no real significance until the census of 1951, at which time it was reported that 5,000 Muslims lived in Britain, mostly of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin²⁸. Over the next four decades, the combined population of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis grew, through initial migration followed by procreation, to 640,000, with 47 per cent of the Muslim population being born in Britain by 1991²⁹. The earlier migration was based purely on economic considerations, though the migrants themselves were not necessarily the poorest from their motherland, but rather from regions that had a tradition of travel and migration. Examples of these are Gujarat in India, with a highly literate and business oriented population and the Northwest Frontier in Pakistan, which were prosperous and fertile lands.

Bangladeshis, with their longer traditional ties with Britain through the merchant navy, are mostly made up of Sylhetis, famous as restaurant workers, today reportedly managing in excess of 3,000 restaurants around Britain.³⁰ The Muslim population overall in Britain was 1,591,000 in the census of 2001, with 787,285 being of Pakistani origin – the largest ethnic minority Muslim population³¹. The migration and settlement of South Asian Muslims occurred in four phases – 1) Pioneers - unmarried men or men migrating without families; 2) ‘Chain Migration’ - pooling of resources to purchase houses in which both a large number of males shared accommodation and as a means to invite more male workers, prominent prior to the Commonwealth Immigration Act, 1962; 3) Immigration of families - often due to rumors or fear of men taking British spouses; and 4) British-born Muslims – with 1.2 per cent of the people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin being British-born, according to the census of 1961. Phases 3 and 4 thus began from the early part of the 1960s and accelerated in particular after the Immigration Act of 1971 which

stipulated that the entire family would have to migrate, rather than the piecemeal arrival of young men alone.³²

The question of religion did not appear explicitly on the census until 2001. Although it was added as a voluntary declaration, 92 per cent of participants selected to affirm their religion. Most striking about the demography of Muslims was that they demonstrated very low levels of education and high levels of ‘poverty indicators’ (living in shared or terraced accommodation, living in accommodation without central heating systems), when compared to the national average. Muslims are also the youngest faith group, with over 50 per cent being under the age of 25.³³ This combination of high levels of disadvantage from the perspective of education, amenities and employment coupled with consequentially higher levels of poverty compared to other faith groups has an evident impact both on the development of a firm British identity and, more worryingly, openness to radicalization. Muslims of Bangladeshi and Pakistani descent tend to be younger³⁴ and live in larger households than the national average, with double the national number of under-16 year olds and circa 5 persons per household compared to the national average of 2.43. The largest populations amongst persons of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin are found in urban areas, particularly in two major concentrations, Birmingham (8 per cent of total city population) and Bradford (11 per cent of total city population). Though the earlier indications were that economic migration was designed to facilitate remittances to families and was to culminate in the eventual voluntary repatriation of Muslims to their homelands, the rights of citizenship and securities which Western secular democracy provide, coupled with social services, free healthcare provision, quality education and other attractive benefits, the situation evolved, as it has in other parts of the developed world, that Muslims were here to stay. Heavy internal investment

thus followed, with the conversion of houses into mosques, *halal* (Islamically permissible) butchers and restaurants, religious education infrastructure, schools and social centers, with remittances petering away into oblivion and ghettos resembling Pakistani and Bangladeshi microcosms emerging in cities and major conurbations. Islam has consequently become the fastest growing religion in Britain as well as the second largest religion³⁵ with the census of 2001 for England and Wales showing that 72 per cent of the population were Christian followed by 3 per cent (1,546,626 people) of the population being Muslim³⁶. This accounts for approximately 9 per cent of the eighteen million Muslims throughout Europe.³⁷

Peek outlines four reasons why religion has become an important basis for identity, within the context of American Muslims, which are equally pertinent to the discourse on British Muslims.³⁸ Firstly, religious identity gains prominence as a reaction to alienation, particularly in circumstances where the individual has moved from being part of the dominant religion of a nation to being a representative of a minority religion. An example is a Pakistani Muslim immigrant to Britain. Secondly, for tangible, material benefits, where a stronger religious identity can facilitate community networking and economic opportunities. Thirdly, shared worship acts as a vehicle for unity amongst diverse groups. Finally, religious identity is seen as a means for the preservation of group cohesion.

The identity of Muslims living in Britain is being challenged and analyzed rigorously, in large part due to public discourse concerning the threat Muslims may pose in the wake of global terrorist attacks and Middle East politics. As a backdrop to this, Muslims were already undergoing significant change over recent decades as they struggled to find an identity and a voice as a minority religion amongst minority ethnic communities living in the West, with beliefs and practices that often put them

at odds with the receiving culture. This has given rise to the ‘deprivationist’ perspective as Lewis describes it, whereby Muslim communities of Asian origin feel discriminated against to the point of racial exclusion, eventually leading to alienation and, occasionally, revolt, such as with the Burnley, Oldham and Bradford riots of summer 2001.³⁹

It could also be argued that the deprivationist perspective does not hold true, but rather that race, religion and culture are mere excuses used by migrant communities to disguise a failure by them to integrate and assimilate with the dominant culture and norms. Often cited as proof of this are figures pertaining to educational standards. For example, in the late eighties, Bangladeshi youths were one sixth as likely to have taken and passed an A-level qualification when compared to the national average. Such figures give rise to the view that it is a fundamental failure of immigrant communities to recognize that their settlement in Britain is permanent and their integration is vital.

Identity framework

Though Muslims themselves often speak of a desire for unity across their communities with a view to following a cohesive way forward for establishing an identity which ‘fits’ their existence in Britain, the reality is that British Muslims have three distinctive choices along three distinctive paths. Geaves expounds the three choices; isolation, assimilation and integration, in his thesis which is based upon ‘three choices being presented to them [young Muslims] *by the receiving culture*.’⁴⁰ In addition to these three choices I have addressed their interplay with a level of loyalty to three available paths, ethnic culture, British culture and religious identity, where ethnic culture addresses internal conflict issues (within families and

communities), British Culture addresses external conflict issues (with the dominant culture) and religious identity which addresses religious conflict issues (alignment with religious values), hence the three paths. The interplay between these three choices and three paths are visible not only at the national or community level, but are highly discernable within individual family units with different siblings being noticeable as archetypes for the available choices and paths.

Study method: ‘The Tebbit Test’

Norman Tebbit, a former British parliamentarian, in an interview in the Los Angeles Times in 1990, famously said:

A large proportion of Britain's Asian population fails to pass the cricket test. Which side do they cheer for? It's an interesting test. Are you still harking back to where you came from or where you are?⁴¹

Thus, in order to further understand the interrelationships of British identity, cultural allegiance and loyalty to Islam more deeply amongst young British men of South Asian origin, I devised a novel and informative survey, based on the now infamous ‘*Tebbit Test*’.

Earlier works have also examined identity issues using the so-called football test. Since Commonwealth countries with large Muslim populations, such as India and Pakistan do not feature in World Cup competition, little can be gained relating to issues of allegiance to countries of origin. However, a deeper understanding on the views pertaining to Britain and ‘British-ness’ can be understood. For example, Hussain and Bagguley’s paper which utilized the football test, found that the use of

the Union Jack (British flag) as a symbol of support for British football teams, was closely related, in the minds of many minority groups, including Muslims, as being symbols of colonialism, white supremacy and far right political organizations, such as the British National Party, who are viewed as having anti-immigrant and racist agendas.⁴² However, many Pakistanis were reported as being proud to fly St George's flag, in support of the England football team as they made no such correlation, irrespective of its relation to the Crusades and Christian heritage.

Though both the cricket test and football test provide insights into identity issues pertaining to cultural convictions, the cricket test goes further, as it also allows for analysis in relation to religious identity. This is because it can be hypothesized and tested whether a British Muslim, say of Pakistani origin, supports a team from another Muslim majority country (for example, Bangladesh) in favor of another opponent (for example, England or India). Thus a clear distinction can be established between religious identity and ethnic or cultural identity.

In the present cricketing survey, questions inquired about sporting allegiances amongst international cricket teams from the Indian subcontinent and England. This data, married with demographic information, in addition to open ended questions about issues pertinent to British Muslims, allowed for some interesting results to be obtained. The sample population consisted of 96 candidates between the ages of 20 and 49. All the candidates were personal contacts, who were individually sent an electronic request message which included a hyperlink to the online survey. The request was made either by direct email or via FaceBook. In all, 60 respondents returned meaningful data ($n=60$), representing a response rate of 62.5 per cent, which is exceptionally high. The high rate of returns is credited to targeted

marketing of the survey amongst a known population, coupled with the novelty of the survey being appealing to participants.

Results and analysis

The general findings of the survey were that two thirds of those sampled were aged between 20 and 34, with the remaining one third between the ages of 35 and 49. Figure 1 illustrates the birth place of respondents and their parents. Seventy-five per cent of respondents were born in England, with 17 per cent born in Pakistan and the remaining 8 per cent born in India. However, in all cases of foreign births, the respondents were relocated to England in infancy or early childhood. The demography of parents' birth was almost exclusively outside the United Kingdom. Amongst fathers, 58 per cent were born in India, 33 per cent in Pakistan and 9 per cent in other countries. Amongst mothers, 42 per cent were born in India, 33 per cent in Pakistan, 8 per cent were born in England and 17 per cent in other countries.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Following the questions about demography, a set of questions about cricketing allegiances were given. Responses to these questions are illustrated in the Appendix. When asked who would be their favored team in a match between England and Pakistan, there was an even split, with 42 per cent favoring each team (the remaining 16 per cent stating that they were 'Not Bothered' and 0 per cent selecting the fourth option which was that they would support 'Both Equally'). Interestingly, when respondents are excluded who were born in Pakistan, or had either parent born in Pakistan (accounting for 58 per cent of the sample population),

only 42 per cent of them stated that they would support England, with 29 per cent supporting Pakistan, 29 per cent 'Not Bothered' and 0 per cent 'Both Equally'. Thus, over half of those respondents with no evident ties to Pakistan and clear ties to England, would still not support England. Those that had ties to Pakistan, either through their birth or either (or both) parent births, none would support England. Even if factors were considered, such as that greater support for Pakistan was due to greater success of that team compared to England at the time the survey was conducted, the overwhelming interpretation is that there are two other forces at work. Firstly, there is allegiance to Pakistan based on religious motives. Secondly, and perhaps more sinister, is that there is perceived to be a level of disdain for England. Whether this is based on a continued backlash to a colonial era, with reinforcement by elders of the Muslim society in Britain, is difficult to say. Respondents were reluctant to articulate this viewpoint. This assessment, however, is reinforced when the data pertaining to a match between England and Bangladesh is examined. The survey revealed that over one-third of respondents did not favor England in this scenario. Thus, from a data pool, where not a single respondent had any ties to Bangladesh, favor towards the home country was still limited. The argument of team strength also does not hold in this scenario as Bangladesh is a comparatively weak team compared to either England or Pakistan. Thus, the data adds more weight to the view that religious commonality, Bangladesh being a majority Muslim country, takes precedent over national pride and loyalty.

A stronger test of the view that religious convictions take precedence over national or cultural ties amongst British Muslims is indicated by the data pertaining to a match between India and Bangladesh. Two-thirds of participants had ties to India, either because it was their birthplace, or one or both parents were born there.

Amongst this data set, 63 per cent would not support India, either favoring Bangladesh, or neither side. This evidence, within the limitations of this survey, is compelling and is the clearest indication that religious convictions remain a strong priority amongst South Asian British men.

So how many of these men actually support England unequivocally? The answer is 42 per cent of the data set supported England exclusively; however, not a single person with ties to Pakistan would support England exclusively. Furthermore, 25 per cent of respondents would not support England under any circumstances.

In order to acquire concrete views about religious belief and British identity, a series of open-ended questions were asked about religious, social and political issues important in recent history. Naturally, since respondents were anonymous, only an insight into personal opinion can be gathered, rather than forming a representational point of view. The first of these questions focused on three major events over the past twenty years; the Rushdie affair, the attacks on September 11, 2001 in the USA and the London bombings on July 7, 2005. Of all the respondents, 50 per cent chose to make no comment. The survey itself was designed so that a response was mandatory, so respondents must make a conscious decision to make no commitment to a view, rather than simply ignore making a statement. Consequently, those who chose not to comment made statements such as 'unsure' or 'none' or 'no comment'. This is significant in itself as there is indication that these issues can be so divisive, that more and more Muslims in Britain are choosing to be apolitical in order to avoid conflict, disharmony or simply in order to lead a quiet existence.

If the remaining 50 per cent responses are taken as the data set of viewpoints, 67 per cent of these considered there to be a conspiracy against Muslims. One respondent wrote, 'They are all fabricated by the West.' Another said, '9-11 was a

conspiracy.’ Another commented, ‘I think it’s all planned by the western governments against the Muslims.’ Yet another commented, ‘There is no clear cut evidence that Muslims actually did it.’ Furthermore, 16.5 per cent of those who expressed a view, considered the issues not relevant to Muslims or an attack on the Muslim reputation. One respondent wrote, ‘(It’s) a drop in the ocean compared to the many current international injustices i.e. Palestine.’ Another said, ‘It is wrong to stereotype Islam and Muslims because of two isolated incidents.’ Finally, 16.5 per cent of those who expressed a view, considered these events tainted Muslims’ reputation and were a blot against Muslims. One respondent wrote, ‘Unfortunate,’ another stated:

Salman Rushdie was wrong to write that book, but by putting a fatwa to have him killed it brought the reputation of Muslims down and gave him support that he shouldn't have had. 9-11 and 7-7 were tragedies because innocent people were killed...

The indication from these responses points towards a defensive stance when it comes to Islam in the current global situation.

When asked, ‘What are your views about religious sects or groups (eg. Jamat e-Islami, Barelwi, Deobandi etc)? Are they relevant to British society? Do they need to be?’ one respondent wrote:

Jamat-e-Islami, Barelwi and Shias who believe in the Prophet Muhammad, are all Muslims, even though they are slightly misguided. It is

the duty of the rightly guided Muslims to bring them back to the right way, not to alienate them.

Another commented, 'It is not particularly relevant and does not need to be relevant to British society.' Yet another commented, 'I think we should find the common ground and forget about the differences and show the world we are united.' Another respondent wrote, 'As long as you (are) Muslim, sects should not matter.' Though finding commonality is the theme articulated, no attempt was made by any respondent as to how that may be attempted or achieved.

When asked, 'What are the major concerns you have about your identity?' one respondent wrote:

I have no concerns about my identity. I am Muslim first and foremost, [and] then I am British. Anyone who says otherwise, that I am not British because I have a beard, wear a 'topee' [religious head covering] and a 'jabbah' [long Arabian robe] do not affect me in any way, because I know they are wrong.

When asked, 'What do you think are the major challenges facing British Muslims today?' one respondent wrote, 'Moral incompatibility.' Another respondent stated, 'Major challenge = not to compromise in their faith despite tremendous pressure from all quarters. Especially the pressure to compromise has been foretold in Islamic tradition.' Another said:

The major challenges facing not only British Muslims but Muslims worldwide is that non-Muslims have a bad impression of Islam, and this is the Muslims' fault, not the media or anybody else's. If Muslims went back to following the commandments of Allah in the way shown by Prophet Muhammad in full, then a lot of racism would stop, and there would be unity in the Ummah [Muslim nation].

Another commented, 'We must act according to teaching of Islam and not copy the West blindly.' Another respondent said, 'Muslims living in British society are more and more moving away from Islam as they take on the life of the West.' The responses almost exclusively demonstrated a desire for the preservation of a religious identity and having that identity recognized outside the Muslim community. However, again, little evidence of how respondents felt that could be achieved.

When asked, 'What are your views about the role of women, assimilation with British culture, and loyalty to your cultural heritage?' one respondent wrote:

In Islam, there is no obligation to "integrate"; rather it is just in the interests of all to do so. However, obviously for all concerned, it's a good thing and should be encouraged but in an environment where a Muslim can be confident to express his Islam views.

Another respondent stated, 'The role of women is clearly defined in Shari'ah; this is what we should follow.' Another commented:

We should not assimilate with British, Indian or any other culture, unless it is approved by Shari'ah [Islamic law]. And why should we be the assimilators? In fact, we should be trying our best to get non-Muslims to assimilate to the values and morals in Islam. It's a shame that it's the other way round.

Another respondent said, 'Women have to have an active role in the society, being mother, sister etc.' Again, a common thread of defensiveness of Islam combined with an articulation of a desire to be understood by broader society is observed.

Conclusions

The findings of this paper through both a review of extant literature and the related exploratory field study, supports Geaves' view that 'Islam is becoming the dominant mark of identity for the Muslim population (in Britain) ... influenced by the worldwide resurgence of Islam.'⁴³ However, it can also be said that Bilgrami's hypothesis also holds true, that:

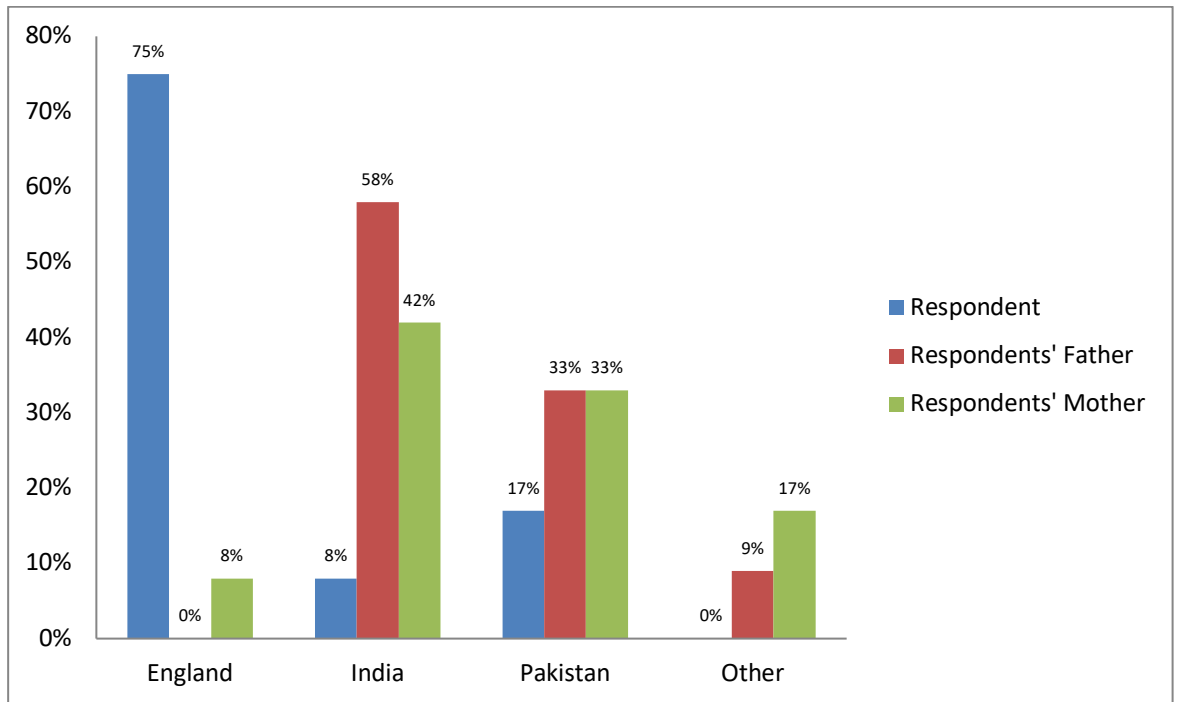
... There is no reason to doubt that Muslims, even devout Muslims, will and do take their commitment to Islam not only as one among other values, but also as something which is itself differentiated internally into a number of, in principle, negotiable detailed commitments.⁴⁴

Thus, the evolution of a British-Islamic identity continues, albeit with its devotees approaching the challenges and choices in a non-uniform, fragmented

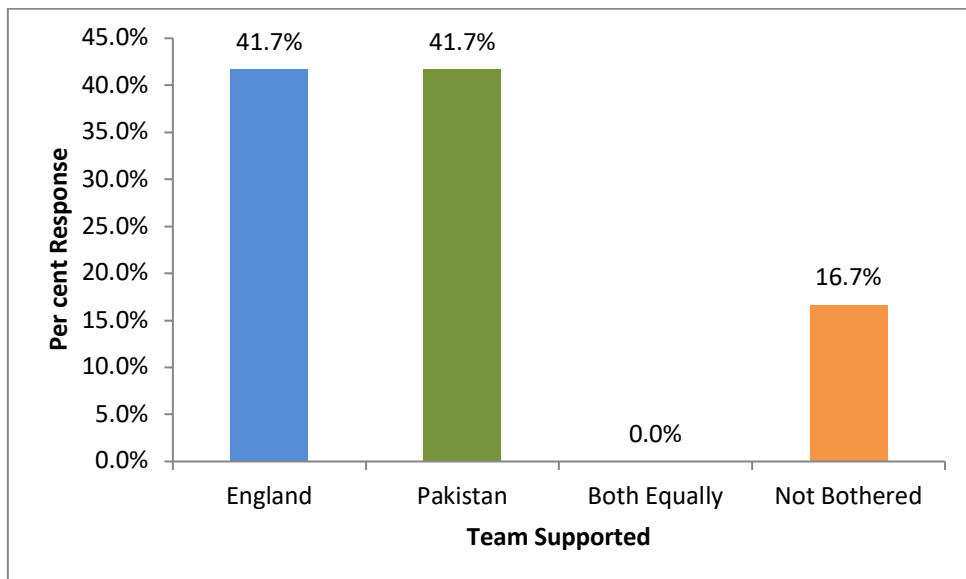
fashion, with little sense of a cohesive strategy for which they are all proponents. This lack of cohesiveness is supported both by comments from participants of the survey and in the cited literature. As Ansari states, ‘...British Muslims at the start of the twenty-first century are neither ethnically nor ideologically homogenous.’⁴⁵

Though the survey is limited, as it negates half the potential demographic, namely women, as well as Muslims originating from countries other than the Indian subcontinent, the exploratory nature of the survey has found a breadth of views to justify further future investigation.

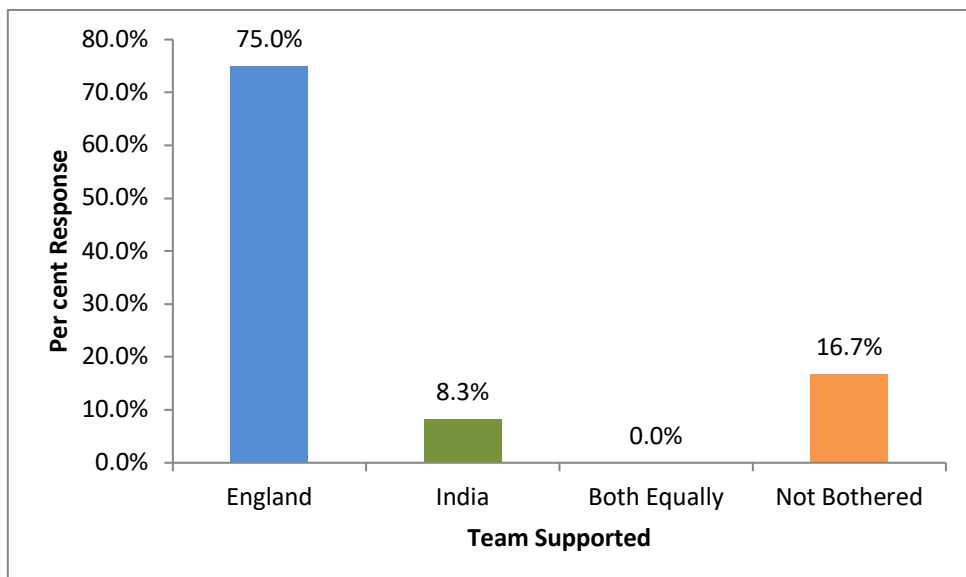
Figure 1. *Place of birth of respondents and their parents*



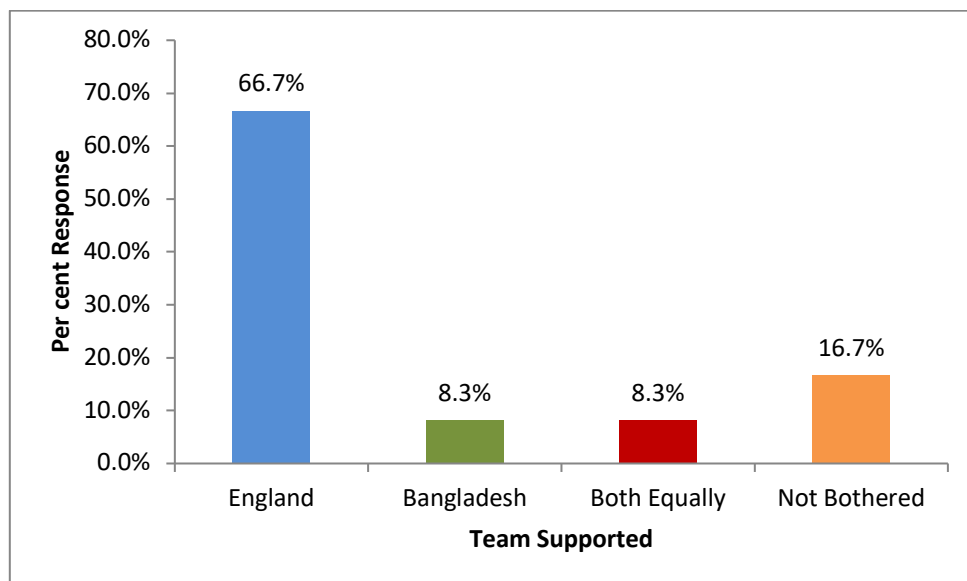
Appendix Figure 1. *Q1. Who would you support in a match between England and Pakistan? (n=60)*



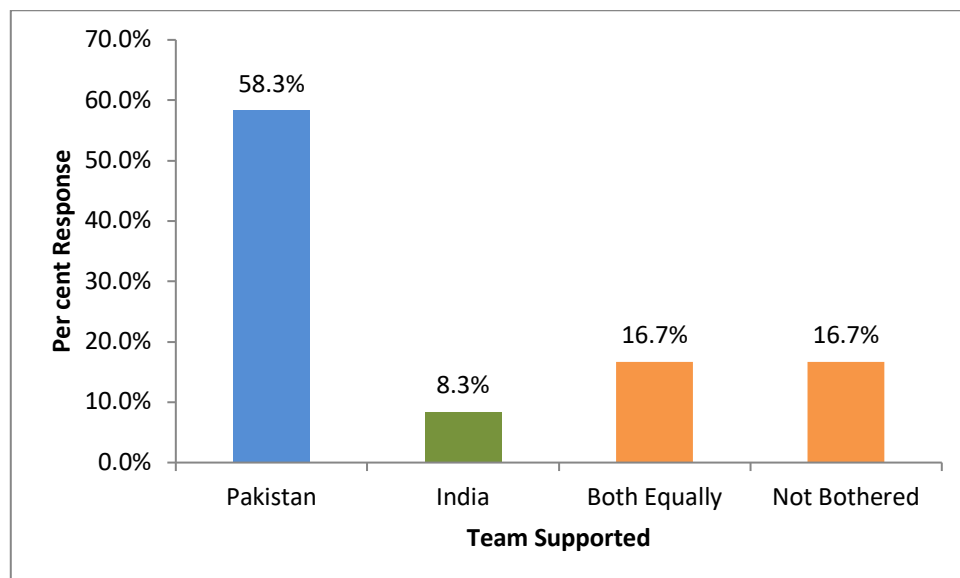
Appendix Figure 2. *Q2. Who would you support in a match between England and India? (n=60)*



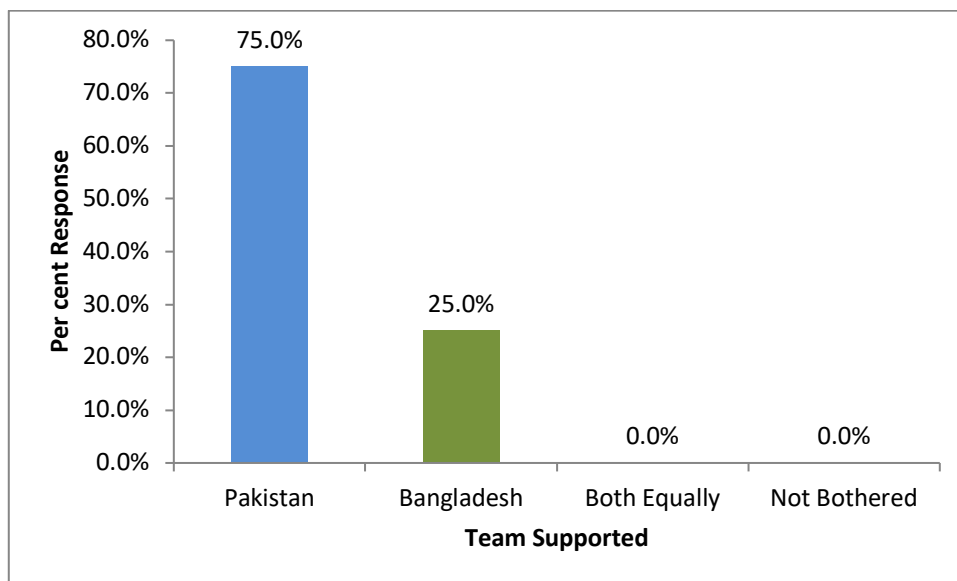
Appendix Figure 3. *Q3. Who would you support in a match between England and Bangladesh? (n=60)*



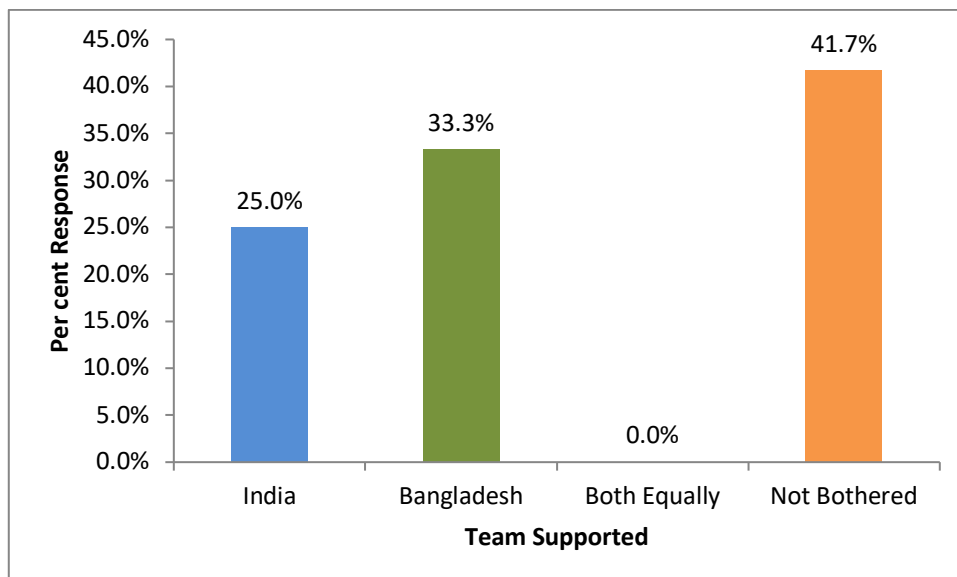
Appendix Figure 4. *Q4. Who would you support in a match between Pakistan and India? (n=60)*



Appendix Figure 5. *Q5. Who would you support in a match between Pakistan and Bangladesh? (n=60)*



Appendix Figure 6. *Q6. Who would you support in a match between India and Bangladesh? (n=60)*



Notes

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⁴⁰ Ibid Geaves, R. 1999.

⁴¹ Los Angeles Times <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes>.

⁴² Hussain, Y. And Bagguley, P. 2005. "Flying the Flag for England? Citizenship, Religion and Cultural Identity among British Pakistani Muslims Since September 11th and the 'Riots' of 2001", in Tahir Abbas (ed), *Muslim Britain: Communities under Pressure*, London: Zed Books.

⁴³ Ibid Geaves, R. 1999: 376.

⁴⁴ Ibid Bilgrami, A. 1992: 1071-78.

⁴⁵ Ibid Ansari, H. 2004: 2.