

Balti Britain by Ziauddin Sardar

Shaks Ghosh enjoys a personal and political journey through the many complexities of multicultural Britain

Balti Britain is not just Ziauddin Sardar's story, it's my story, and the story of countless other people like us, who, born in India, have made a new home in the UK.

Its first chapter is even based in Leicester where I first really experienced living as an Asian in Britain. The coincidence made me laugh out loud. That said, there's not a lot that I found amusing about this book. It's a serious book about serious issues.

On the back cover, the usual brief synopsis distils the contents into a few lines. It asks, "Are arranged marriages a good thing? How 'authentic' is a vindaloo?" And, you could read *Balti Britain* on that level. But, that would be a shame. It would be missing an opportunity to gain an insight into the real complexity of what it means to be a British Asian. Particularly in the wake of 7/7, Sardar's questions on belonging and multiculturalism have acquired a new urgency, for everyone.

Part travelogue through Asian Britain, part autobiography, much of *Balti Britain* chronicles Sardar's journey of self-discovery and through that journey, his realisation of a "long history of mutual entanglement between Britain and India".

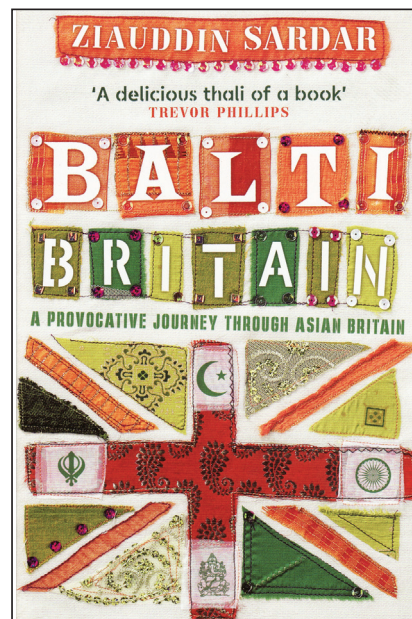
A single surviving photograph of his grandfather, showing a decorated soldier of the Raj, proved that his own family entanglement dated back much further than his father's arrival in London in the 1950s and leads Sardar to uncover interconnections between India and Britain dating back well over 400 years.

To quote his family patriarch, he found "there is more than one way of knowing". Yet, he questions why Britain seems intent on the idea that there is only "Henry to Hitler". Even the once mighty East India Company seems to have left little physical trace. A tour of its London 'sights' is literally "a tour of invisibility". For want of a better word, it is almost as if Britain has whitewashed her colonial history.

Sardar cites the Black American Nobel

laureate Toni Morrison who argues that the whole of American history, narrative and visual culture is structured around an elephant in the room, the African elephant of Negro chattel slavery. Does Britain have an Indian elephant in the room, and if so, what are the implications?

Perhaps, as one of Sardar's friend's comments, "if you are going to tell them they [British Asians] are strangers in this land, that they have no history of



involvement and entanglement with Britain, you should not be surprised they end up feeling like strangers."

So has Britain's previously cherished multiculturalism failed? Riots in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, terrorist atrocities and plots have inevitably led to a backlash and I remember hot discussion with my own friends on the topic following 7/7. We were the generation who were the advocates, the architects and custodians of multiculturalism. How could it have come to this? If we weren't allowed to believe in it, what could we believe in?

Sardar acknowledges its deficiencies, its uneasy co-existence alongside feminism and liberalism and the problems surrounding segregation of communities

in places such as Oldham, but claims that standing against multiculturalism is like defying gravity – it is a reality which cannot be avoided. And, as he points out, if we see riots purely in terms of race, we miss the underlying grievances. So much of what has happened in places like Oldham has been down to social and economic deprivation, the problems which third sector organisations like many of your own grapple with everyday.

Which leads me to my only criticism of *Balti Britain*. It is so concerned with analysis that there is no time for pragmatic solutions. What can we do?

One clue might lie in Sardar's thought provoking descriptions of the effectiveness of multicultural policies in Tower Hamlets which provided subsidies for community development and targeted grants for specific projects. During the 1990s the community received just enough financial support to galvanise and transform itself.

And perhaps, the only way to help the diverse communities we are talking about when we lump British Asians into one great amorphous group, is to help them to help themselves, through their own grass roots organisations. They probably already have a fair idea of the answers.

Ultimately, *Balti Britain* will keep you thinking and mulling over its ideas well after you've turned the final page. It serves as not only a huge resource to help us all better understand what we really mean by British Asian but might also provide you with some inspiration.

My hope is that it will not just be people like me – whose story it already is – who will read this book. But, that it will resonate far wider. If, as Sardar claims, the alienation of British Asians begins with the history of forgetting, then we all need to start remembering.

Shaks Ghosh is chief executive of venture philanthropy fund, the Private Equity Foundation

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