A Brief Report of the visit of Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury in the UK in May-June 2009 as a Visiting Fellow to the Brunel Law School, Uxbridge, UK

Has the multicultural Britain been hit by a fresh bout of xenophobia (more precisely Islamophobia) following the terrorist attack in London in July 2005 after the USA's 9/11? Have the younger Muslims in this country been living since then with a constant fear of being picked up by the cops at the drop of a hat as Britain has come under the spell of a new security discourse following the terrorist attacks in the USA, UK, Spain and other Western countries? Or is Lord Bhikhu Parekh's[1] multicultural Britain still continues to be an abode for people with different skin colours, belonging to different religious, ethnic or linguistic groups? In order to scrutinize some of these issues, I spent about three weeks in London and Leicester. As a Visiting Fellow of the Brunel Law School, my first objective was to consult the library of Brunel University at Uxbridge and also the British Library in London. My other objective was to interact with some younger Muslims from South Asia to have an idea of their perception about the British multiculturalism in these changing times.

I

Ashfaq[2] is a Bangladeshi Muslim whose parents migrated to Britain in the 1970s. Ashfaq grew up in this adopted land of their parents with a lot of dreams. He was educated in Leicester and Birmingham, the cities largely populated by the South Asians. As a child, he was very proud to be born in England. He says that, on the one hand, he wanted to belong to England, and therefore, was quite anxious whether he could assimilate into the dominant English or British culture. But, on the other hand, he also wanted to maintain connections with his inherited Islamic tradition and culture. He felt that, as a child with parents of foreign origin, he had to 'become' English for being 'accepted' in the British society. He could feel that, even his parents expected that of him, although they themselves could not 'become English' as first generation immigrants. Perhaps his parents sensed that, 'being English' could achieve a degree of safety and security for him. After all, returning to Bangladesh was out of question for the family because it would be a return to hunger and poverty. Interestingly enough, one can find a resonance of this kind of perception of a Muslim youth in a recent publication.[3] In fact, a quote from Sarfraz Majoor in a leading British daily is also quite interesting to analyze. What Sarfraz says there somewhere converges with the concerns of Ashfaq. Sarfraz says: "For a child of immigrants, the most hurtful insult that could be hurled was the one which challenged the right to call this country home. The challenge usually took the form of three words, "Go back home". These words stung because they implied that they did not truly belong in Britain."[4]

Akbar Anwar, a young Muslim graduate student from Zambia, alleges that some scholars in the West easily blame us for everything bad. One of them has recently written

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[1] Bhikhu C. Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Macmillan, London, 2000

[2] These names are not real. Most of the names of my respondents have been changed for their security.

[3] Victor Jeleniewski Seidler, *Urban Fears and Global Terrors: Citizenship, Multicultures and Belongings After 7/7*, Routledge, New York, 2007, p. 198

[4] *Observer*, 21 August 2005, p. 25

that, "Muslim minorities currently enjoy only limited theological guidance about how to practice Islam in a country dominated by secular social, political, economic, and cultural traditions."[5] Now, it may be true that, people of Diasporas often carry political grievances in their baggage. It may also be true that, the Muslim immigrants may come under the influence of the jihadists, as they sometimes have in Britain, and aim their political anger against the host societies.[6] Rafiq Ahmed, a Muslim from India, points out that, it is not fair to conclude that fear, uncertainty and anxiety among many Muslims simply imply that this is a community whose loyalty to Britain and the British way of life is in doubt.

I asked another group of young Muslims in Leicester whether they feel insecure as Muslims after 9/11, 7/7 and 21/7 or not. This I asked after knowing that, a senior and respectable British Muslim gentleman had to drop one of them back home as this young Muslim student did not have his own car, he had a beard, his skin colour was different and it was not perceived to be safe to travel in public transport immediately after the terrorist attack in London on 7 July 2005. The responses were quite interesting and varied. One of them, Salim Usmani, tried to suggest that, a long time has passed since then, and therefore, there was no more need for such scare among them. But, Akbar Ahmed, is more candid and critical of his friend and says that: "When you know that, even speaking the truth, discussing the reality with the strangers, or people belonging to other religious communities may land you up in Guantanamo Bay or places like that, will you not prefer to remain politically correct and try to say instead something that somewhat less known person prefers to listen to?"

Mushtafizur Rahman, a man in his late 30s said that, as a Bangladeshi Muslim, who had distant relatives in Pakistan, he visited those relatives in Karachi in 2004 with his wife and children within four or five years of their marriage. Does that imply that they have anything to do with the so-called *jihad* against the West? Can we paint the people with the same brush, or should we do so? Even being a Pakistani, or being a man or woman from Afghanistan, being someone from Iraq or Iran is not somebody's fault.

A more outspoken person, Imtiaz Ahmed from Pakistan, said: "My friends here may prefer to be politically correct, or may be that they are saying what they actually feel. But, I have something different to tell you. Let me be quite frank with you and say that I am not, in any way, happy about what is happening in Iraq since 2003. But, if someone, less or not known to me, enquires about my take on the issue, I feel that I have to be pretty careful. After all, sometimes we feel very insecure when we go out in the street alone. It may be one of the reasons for our living in some kind of a ghetto in Leicester, even after being a comparatively prosperous person." At this point, Salim interrupted him to say that, this, he thinks, is not the only reason for living together in a locality. It is rather some other reasons, the cuisine and culture that are easily available in a part of the city, which make them live close by. He pointed out that: "Many Muslims from South Asia, as students or as employees of some organizations, live in Dublin, Glasgow, Oxford, Cambridge, or any other city or town less populated by Muslims, and they do not live in any ghetto, or they do not rush to Leicester or Birmingham every weekend."

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[5] Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam rising: Muslim extremism in the West*, Rowman and Littlefield, Oxford, 2005, p.87

[6] Ted Robert Gurr, "Minorities, Nationalists and Islamists: Managing Communal Conflict in the Twenty-First Century", in Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela R. Aall (eds.), *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C., 2007, p. 136

Dr. Chowdhury, a middle-aged lawyer and social worker from Bangladesh says: "It is a fact that 1.6 million Muslims live in Britain. We are the largest religious minority group in this country and have become an integral part of the British society, or at least we feel so. But, since 9/11 and 7/7, there has been an intensification of anti-Muslim attitudes in Britain." He asks: "Can you start discriminating against a community because a few from that community were involved in ghastly terrorist attacks? Did you do so when the people of Northern Ireland were fighting for their cause? In a way, even for the inhabitants of Afghanistan or Palestine, is it not a fight for their rights, their liberation? Can all their activities be branded as terrorism with a single brush? And, don't you think that the gradual marginalization of Yasser Arafat so far as the Palestinian struggle is concerned, has given rise to Hamas? Can you, in any way, justify the indiscriminate bombing of Lebanon by the Israeli forces for the attacks by the Hezbollah? After all, in many cases, the fight of the Palestinians against Israel was against discrimination, against deprivation, against forceful occupation of the Palestinian territory. When there is injustice, it may be in Northern Ireland, or the then East Pakistan, it may be against the African-Americans in the USA, or any other part of the world, the people in those parts of the world come together, organize themselves and fight for their cause. And, these struggles are not necessarily along the religious lines, not necessarily always follow, what you call, radical Islam. If there is poverty, injustice or deprivation in this world, the affected people will fight for their rights, justice, accountability and transparency. And, these struggles sometimes take a non-violent path espoused by the great leader Mahatma Gandhi, and they may sometimes take a violent path of any variety as well. Poverty and deprivation may easily push a particular group of people toward extremism. You cannot expect those people to be tolerant. Can you?"

If we examine the number and presence of Muslims in Britain, taking cue from some of Dr. Chowdhury's remarks, we find that, after France and Germany, Britain is home to the greatest number of Muslims in any EU country.[7] This is an outcome of the immigration from the countries belonging to the British Commonwealth since the 1950s.[8] In the earlier days, the migrants from South Asia were mainly from rural farm-owning and artisan background. They came and filled up the position of male labour "to meet the demand for unskilled and semi-skilled industrial workers in the British economy".[9] Their wives and children started arriving from about the 1970s when they were surer about their socio-economic status in their adopted land.[10] The proportion of urban professionals among South Asian Muslims was small, though it increased with the arrival of the refugees from East Africa in the late 1960s and 1970s (though the majority of this group were Hindus and Sikhs).[11]

From the 1970s onwards Britain, especially, London and its suburbs, as a cosmopolitan centre, has been very attractive for the comparatively rich and professional classes.[12] During this period there have also been waves of refugees from other parts of the Muslim world, notably from Somalia, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq.[13] But, it seems that,

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[7] 1.6 million in the 2001 Census, more than half of South Asian, primarily Pakistani, origin.

[8] Tariq Modood, "British Muslims and the Politics of Multiculturalism", in Tariq Modood, Anna Triandafyllidou, Ricard Zapata-Barrero (eds.), *Multiculturalism, Muslims and Citizenship: A European Approach*, Routledge, New York, 2006, p.37.

[9] Op. cit., pp. 37-38.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Op. cit., p. 38.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

since the 1990s, and particularly post 9/11, the situation of the migrants from South Asia, particularly of Muslim origin, became more complicated.

On the one hand, the British economy, like any other advanced market economy of the world, was looking forward to the cheaper versions of workers (no more unskilled or semi-skilled labour) or 'techno-coolies' in a globalizing economy. On the other hand, the cosmopolitan fabric of the British society was coming under serious strain in view of ever-increasing securitisation of the society. Therefore, in the last decade or so, Britain has been a big draw for all kinds of migrants, particularly, students and professionals, many of whom are Muslims.[14] But, if we go by the accounts of some of the South Asian Muslims living in Britain, we feel a sense of greater xenophobia, in particular, Islamophobia. The problems may not be entirely non-existent so far as the Tarmulke-wearing Jews, turban wearing Sikhs or saree-wearing Hindu women are concerned. But, after the terrorist attacks in Britain, and in view of a growing sense of insecurity among the people belonging to the majority White Anglo-Saxon Christian community, the political parties, like the British National Party, has been able to raise anti-Muslim rhetoric. Even some of the representatives of the more liberal British parties also did not wish to be entirely out of this xenophobic tune. These have definitely worsened the situation of the South Asian Muslims. There have been many instances of the detention of more and more Briton Muslims without trial for a long time although very few of these detainees were charged with offence. The presence of a large Muslim underclass in Britain has also perhaps increased the anxiety of the ruling elite, who consider these poorer Muslims as potential *jihadis*, more gullible, and victim of all sorts of enticements from the terrorist organizations or their sleeper cells.

II

Jacques Derrida once said: "We are going we are moving around: from transgression to transgression but also from digression to digression. What does that mean, this *step too many*, and the transgression, if for the invited guest as much as for the visitor, the crossing of threshold always remains a transgressing step? And if it even have to remain so? And what is meant by this *step to one side* digression? Where do these strange processes of digression lead? These interminable, uncrossable thresholds, and these aporias? It is as though we were going from one difficulty to another. Better or worse, and more seriously, from one impossibility to another impossibility. It is as though hospitality were the impossible: as though the law of hospitality defined this very impossibility."[15] He also asked: Isn't the question of the foreigner… a foreigner's question? Coming from the foreigner, from abroad?[16] … He reminds us that, "In many of Plato's Dialogues, it is often the Foreigner (*xenos*) who questions. He carries and puts the question.[17]

Derrida thus explored the rights of the stranger, arguing that ethics is fundamentally about hospitality. To him, if we fail to treat strangers with hospitality, they become aliens. If they are aliens, then they are not regarded as rights-bearing individuals, and we have no responsibility towards them. If we have no responsibility towards them, they remain

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dofourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond Jacques Derrida (Cultural Memory in the Present)* (translated by Rachel Bowlby), Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000, p.3.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Op. cit., p. 5.

outsiders, and they become targets of xenophobia. If they are the targets of xenophobic fear, then they are enemies. Derrida's account of hospitality thus illustrated the contradictory nature of a specific cluster of interconnected concepts: host, guest and stranger.[18] The same type of argument can be deployed in an analysis of the Greek *xenos* (stranger) from which we derive "xenophobia".

On the other hand, contemporary multiculturalism can be considered as a framework for the development of an ethic of cosmopolitanism—care for others, recognition, self-critical irony and hospitality.[19] It has also been argued that, it is important to distinguish between multiculturalism as a policy, as a moral position and as the description of a state of affairs. The argument against multiculturalism as a state of affairs is problematic, because as a matter of fact the majority of nation-states are multicultural. To adopt a radical and critical position against multiculturalism as a state of affairs can only lead to rather extreme policies such as repatriation. Multiculturalism means the existence within the same society of a diversity of different cultures and communities, but the principal multicultural debate is about the cultural diversity that is produced by migrant communities. It is simply that multicultural strategies may have failed to produce justice and equality, but the opposite of multiculturalism cannot be in practical terms involuntary repatriation.[20]

In Europe, multiculturalism in effect means religious diversity. It is for this reason that many of the recent conflicts around multiculturalism have assumed a religious component. Britain has definitely been the classic model of liberalism. But, it has been late to develop a robust policy for the creation of citizenship and it has had until recently no ideological view of multiculturalism. Migration has simply been treated as something that is useful for the labour market. Britain has had a race relations policy rather than a multicultural policy, and governmental strategies towards race have been provoked by, rather than developed in response to, a series of public crises mainly involving black British communities who came originally from the Caribbean. Only recently, Britain has faced growing tensions with the Muslims who came primarily from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.[21]

But then, the modern state, particularly in a fast globalizing world, has a contradictory relationship to multiculturalism and migration, on the one hand, and to order and sovereignty, on the other. In a market economy, the state seeks to encourage labour migration. In this situation, the state appears to be under constant pressure from big trans-national corporations and their allies to reduce the resistance of labour to the logic of capital accumulation. Now, one solution to this could be the resistance of organised labour to foreign labour. However, as the state also has an interest in sustaining its own sovereignty, it wants to impose a cultural and moral unity, some kind of artificial homogeneity on a visibly plural society. In some instances, therefore, there is a tendency to prefer the model of 'melting pot' to a more multicultural model of 'salad bowl'. So, the economic interests of the advanced countries, on the one hand, produce cultural diversity through labour migration. But, on the other, its commitment to protecting its sovereign power requires it to sustain a moral unity, to reduce cultural complexity and plurality, and finally, to assimilate the migrant.

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[18] E. Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, University of Miami Press, Coral Gables, FL, 1973, pp. 607-08.

[19] For details, please see, B.S. Turner, "Cosmopolitan Virtue, Globalization and Patriotism", *Theory Culture & Society*, Vol. 19, Nos. 1–2, 2002, pp. 45–63.

[20] E. Benveniste, op. cit., p. 611.

[21] Ibid., p. 612.

In that sense, the market-friendly state in a globalizing world is an administrative order. It seeks to maximise the social potential of its population (and hence it has an interest in supporting migration). But, it also has an interest in the enforcement of a particular type of governmentality.[22] "Most social knowledge these days has returned to two problems that were increasingly becoming the domain of sciences; time and space…"[23] "With regard to space the need is to address how you negotiate differences that are territorially defined. Multiculturalism deals with that."[24]

But, these accounts of some of the younger South Asian Muslims indicate that, the position of the contemporary British state and society is a reflection of the state of exception that Carl Schmitt wrote about, when he argued that, even the liberal states would deny liberty if they feel that their own survival is threatened.[25] Therefore, this negotiation of differences is conditioned by the decision of the sovereign as it is the sovereign who decides on the state of exception.

In fact, on the basis of these interactions with the Muslims living in the UK, one may feel inclined to agree with Giorgio Agamben as he says that, the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including the so-called democratic ones,[26] and contemporary Britain is no exception to that. The contemporary British state, being scared of losing its 'Britishness', being engulfed by Islamophobia seems to change its form and content – preferring a permanent state of exception even at the cost of its long-cherished democratic and multicultural tradition. If this somehow appears to be true, then there is of course a need for rethinking British multiculturalism.

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[22] E. Benveniste, op. cit., p. 611.

[23] "The Darker Side of Modernity: Ashis Nandy in conversation with Phillip Darby", in Philip Darby (ed.), *Postcolonizing the International: Working to Change the Way We Are*, University of Hawaii Press, 2006, p.116.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Sara E. Davies, "International Law and the State of Exception", in Alex J. Bellamy, Roland Bleiker, Sara E. Davies and Richard Devetak (eds.), *Security and the War on Terror*, Routledge, New York, 2008, p.75.

[26] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007, p.2.