
*Postcolonial People* is one of the first edited volumes to focus specifically upon the histories, politics and everyday experiences of British South Asians. The book brings together sociological theory, thick historical description and contemporary accounts to articulate the postcolonial location of British South Asians, who are referred to by the editors and most of the book’s contributors as ‘BrAsian’. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and have learnt much from it. In this short review essay, I shall not attempt to provide a resume of all the chapters. Rather, I shall endeavour to draw out some of the book’s themes that stand out for me.

One of the most innovative, creative and ambitious aspects of the book is the editors’ desire to develop new ‘language games’ with which to describe British South Asians. Advancing within this theoretical and methodological frame in the book’s introduction, S. Sayyid (p. 6-8) discusses the intellectual impetus for the deployment of the term ‘BrAsian’ to denote South Asian settlers to Britain and their descendants. Underpinning the idea of BrAsian is the political necessity ‘to replace the colonial *teleos* with a vision in which the distinction between West and non-West is no longer privileged’ (p. 7, original emphasis). Sayyid thinks that this term is not the ‘correct answer’ to the
matter of naming British Asian subjectivities because it is located within the colonial 'order of things'. However, he argues that there is of yet no better alternative. It is in the face of the editors’ ambition to find new ways of naming BrAsians that it is appropriate for the book to include a revised version of Tariq Modood’s now famous essay on the politics of Blackness and South Asian identities. In his essay Modood provides a sophisticated and for some controversial analysis of the reasons why he thinks that the signifier ‘Black’ fails to capture and account for the complexities of BrAsians’ identities.

Read collectively, the chapters exemplify that the ‘postcolonial’ does not simply signal a point in time that marked the collapse of European Empires; rather, postcolonialism is a conceptual way of thinking about the articulation in the present of colonial practices, representations and nuances that accumulated in notions of Western superiority and racial hierarchy. From this point of view, Barnor Hesse and S. Sayyid mobilise the term ‘coloniality’ to analyse the manifestation of the colonial worldview in the present. The chapters that follow trace articulations of colonial notions of White British/English cultural superiority in the present and the history, complexity and diversity of BrAsians’ identities and strategies of resistance.

It is worth reflecting for a moment upon the ways in which the contributors disrupt any neat codification of BrAsian migration and settlement histories to the UK. In this vein, Humayun Ansari’s chapter focuses upon colonial migration histories between 1857 and 1947, thus dispelling the popular myth that BrAsian migration to the UK only occurred after formal decolonialisation in 1947. Turning her attention to post-1947 settlement histories, Nasreen Ali’s chapter critiques sociological models of migration that
reduce the complexity of migration to ‘push and pull’ factors. Ali asserts that accounts of postcolonial people’s migrations must place emphasis upon the historical ruptures that facilitate ‘chain migration’ patterns.

Ali’s critique of migration theory complements the contributors’ collective rejection of scholarship and social policy that contributes to distorted representations of BrAsians as out of place in the West, and BrAsianness as exotic when juxtaposed to the often ethnically unmarked White British culture. For example, Fauzia Ahmad’s chapter challenges anthropological studies that associate arranged marriages with forced marriages. Moreover, Claire Alexander and Avtar Brah, in their respective chapters critique anthropological accounts that have supported the idea that BrAsians are ‘torn between two cultures’. In other words, these scholars argue against the idea that BrAsians are positioned in-between their parents’ Eastern values and the supposedly more forward looking liberal values of the West. Turning to the world of BrAsian art, John Holt and Laura Turney take issue with the history of art and its mainstream institutionalisation that has until recently interpreted BrAsian artists’ work through a series of ‘clichéd symbols of the Orient: sensual, erotic, symbolic and spiritual’ (p. 332). Karl Atkin examines the maintenance and control of institutional racism in British health care. His focus is upon the processes that have the often unintended effect of either ignoring the cultural and religious requirements of BrAsians and/or result in stereotypical exaggeration of BrAsians’ needs.

A theme that is crucial to the book is the multiplicity of ways in which BrAsians have become politicised and mobilised collectively against the state, the police and the employer, for example, through participation in the trade
union movement, BrAsian Muslims’ politicisation in the wake of the Rushdie affair and the recent uprisings in English northern towns. In his chapter, John Hutnyk argues that histories of BrAsian activism in ‘workplace and neighbourhood organisations, trade unions….socialist and communist party affiliation’ need to be written in order to counteract depoliticised anthropological studies that focus on caste, kinship and religion (p. 76).

A further theme running throughout the book is the recent criminalisation of BrAsians in British society. Avtar Brah argues that this process of criminalisation can not be understood outside of the new global imperialism associated with the so-called ‘war on terror’. Advancing this aspect of the book, Virinder S. Kalra examines the criminalisation of BrAsian Muslim men of Pakistani heritage. He draws upon official statistics on prison convictions and police ‘stop and search’ profiles to illuminate some of the ways in which these men face racial harassment in the criminal justice system. Kalra argues that BrAsian Muslims’ experience of police racism resonates with that traditionally endured by African-Caribbean men.

Claire Alexander also questions the recent criminalisation of BrAsian youths post 9/11 and the common perception that they pose a fundamental threat to British society. She traces the shift in the representation of BrAsian youth from ‘passive victim’ to ‘aggressor’. Alexander reports that the image of BrAsians as ‘fanatics’ took hold after the Rushdie affair and was cemented by the 2001 uprisings. She contends that the media representation of the riots criminalised BrAsian men through associating them with drugs and gang activity. This portrait of BrAsian youth, Alexander suggests, facilitates a chain of stereotypical associations including the notion that Muslim cultures are
inherently patriarchal (p. 268). It is in the face of these commonplace representations that she advocates that emphasis should be put upon the formation of new BrAsian youth ethnicities manifest in Bhangra and Bollywood Dreams. These cultural formations highlight the ‘syncretic and globalised nature of BrAsian identities and their role in challenging racism and racist stereotypes’ (p. 270). These themes are examined further by Sanjay Sharma in his analysis of BrAsian popular music and Rachel Dwyer in her chapter on Hindi cinema in Britain.

A central feature of the book is the (con)fusion between White British and South Asian cultures. On the one hand, the reader is shown the futility of thinking of BrAsian cultural formations as the outcome of mixing distinct Eastern and Western parts. Rather, White Britishness and BrAsianness have no distinct or original moment of intercultural exchange and separation. Religious syncretism is also a theme that reoccurs in some of the chapters. In this regard, Avtar Brah contends that for South Asians in East Africa, there was no sense of animosity between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Rather people shared, celebrated and participated in each other’s religious celebrations. Arvind Mandair goes one stage further to suggest that before the Raj there was no religious distinction between Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism.

This book also provides an insight into the formation and realities of BrAsian ethnoscapes in cities, towns and suburbs. In this vein, Seán McLoughlin scrutinises the representation of Bradford within anthropological texts, travel writing, religious studies and novels. In the course of so doing, his analysis reveals something about Bradford as a place and highlights the shifts within writers’ representations of ‘Brad-istan’ from the 1970s to the present.
Particularly poignant given the title of the book - *A Postcolonial People* - are the words of Khalil, a character in Mohammed Yunas Alam’s recent novel set in Bradford. Khalil’s nickname is ‘Kilo’, which refers to his profession as a local drugs dealer. When Kilo was accused by a policeman of ‘killing your own people’, he replied, ‘My people?...I had no people’ (p.140).

In the book’s introduction Sayyid argues that anyone who mistakes the title of this book for an encyclopaedia of knowledge about British South Asians will be sorely disappointed. It seems to me that this book achieves what it set out to accomplish. That is, it puts academics, students and policy makers on the right path towards developing new ‘language games’ that refuse to feed the Western White British appetite and desire for ‘otherness’.