

An Exodus Grows in Brooklyn; 9/11 Still Rippling Through Pakistani Neighborhood

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The FBI grabbed the cook at Lazzat Pakistani Pizzeria as he spun dough. The plump newsstand man from Lahore rode the D-train to register with the Immigration and Naturalization Service -- and never came back. The owner of Kashmir Travel pulled down his metal gate one night and vanished. His darkened store sits there, paperwork, copiers and gumballs in place.

Qamar, 25, drove his mom, dad and younger brother north a month ago. His brother had a visa problem so his parents decided to apply for asylum in Toronto. Now the younger brother calls Qamar in Brooklyn each night.

"He wanted to know all about prom night at Dewey High School," says Qamar, who asked that his last name not be used. His hair is gelled and brushed forward, his jeans ride low; his affect is Pakistani boyz in the New York 'hood. "He still thinks he's coming back.

"I tell him: 'Hello! Brother, that life's over.' "

Once the mosque on Coney Island Avenue was so crowded on Friday afternoons that white-capped Pakistani taxi drivers and computer analysts placed their prayer rugs on the sidewalk. Once the restaurants were so crowded that scents of saffron and rose water and vindaloo wafted across the broad avenue all night.

Now Little Pakistan in Brooklyn is a neighborhood being pulled up at its roots. Of the 120,000 or so Pakistanis who lived near here, 15,000, maybe more, have left for Canada, Europe or Pakistan, according to Pakistani government estimates. The departures began after Sept. 11, 2001, when federal agents began stopping and detaining hundreds of Pakistanis. The exodus accelerated five months ago when the Department of Homeland Security required that every male Pakistani visa holder age 16 or older register with the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Pakistanis make up the largest immigrant group of the 25 nations, almost all of them predominantly Muslim, named in the registration requirements. The immigration bureau acknowledges that more than 83,000 males have registered and that 2,747 are currently detained, but refuses to specify the number of Pakistanis. Although Pakistan is a U.S. ally, key al Qaeda leaders have been arrested there and federal investigators have turned their attention to the community here -- with disquieting results.

The mosque on Coney Island Avenue is one-third empty on Fridays. Restaurants close at 10 p.m. Hairdressers and pizza joints report a 40 percent drop in business. Sada-E-Pakistan newspaper, written in Urdu, sells 60 percent fewer ads. The United States has deported enough illegal immigrants to Islamabad to fill four jetliners.

In what was the tightest of labor markets, "For Rent" and "Help Wanted" signs sprout on lampposts and in grocery stores.

The Pakistani Embassy reports that immigrants from the nation -- the largest concentration of them living in New York -- have shipped hundreds of millions of dollars back home. Its foreign exchange holdings have jumped

from \$1.2 billion on Sept. 11, 2001, to \$10 billion today.

In the rowhouses and apartment buildings of Brooklyn and Queens, the sense of being watched is pervasive. Pakistani immigrants with their proper South Asian English accents and their 70-hour workweeks and their ever-more-American ways live in a state of suspicion. Children are pulled out of schools by parents fleeing to Pakistan. Wives watch husbands being taken into detention. Many fear their phones are tapped, their e-mails monitored.

In his storefront office at the Council of Pakistan Organization, Mohammad "Moe" Razvi, a gregarious bolt of a man who was 6 years old when his family arrived here from Lahore, rummages through his desk drawers. He pulls out a laminated book and flips to two pages of FBI and INS business cards. For months, these cards have appeared in door jambs and mailboxes throughout the neighborhood.

"Hello," reads the handwritten note on the back of a card. "I'm with the FBI. Please contact me ASAP."

Most Pakistanis complied and many disappeared into detention facilities. Fear of the cards grew. "A friend of mine saw that card and didn't come home again for four days," Razvi recalled. "Not a day goes by that someone doesn't ask me: What's next?"

FBI officials describe the Muslim communities as engaged in a mutually beneficial dialogue, and they defend questionings as needed to safeguard national security. Some mosques -- although none that are predominantly Pakistani -- have been linked to fundamentalist clerics. The FBI has assigned a team of agents who investigate terrorism to visit mosques and talk with the ethnic media, and to assure both that no ill will is intended.

"We understand that you feel frightened and afraid and angry," special agent Mary Jo Lyons, clad in a black head scarf, told 200 people assembled in a mosque in Little Pakistan a week ago. "We are in a war on terror, and the only way to overcome the fear is to work hand in hand with us."

Pakistani immigrants readily agree that the United States has a right to police its border. The Pakistani Embassy estimates that 30,000 of its nationals live here "without status," meaning that they have overstayed their visas or lack proper working papers. As the saying goes here, these people live on the mercy of circumstance.

But the United States is a nation -- and New York is a city -- stuffed to the gills with immigrants. Each ethnic community has its legal citizens and visa holders, as well as illegal immigrants. The government has subjected only a handful of these communities to intense government scrutiny, few as rigorously as the Pakistanis. This disparity confounds them.

No Pakistanis, they note, were among the Sept. 11 hijackers. Just four of the roughly 410 Pakistanis deported by the United States were felons, according to the Pakistani Embassy. Three residents of Little Pakistan -- an emergency medical services worker, an auxiliary cop and a businessman -- died inside the World Trade Center, and commemorative photos of the towers adorn the walls of grocery stores and restaurants here.

Asad Reza, a painfully polite man dressed in slacks, a polar vest and a gray cap, sits, legs crossed, in a dimly lit room on Coney Island Avenue, waiting to speak to a lawyer. He's a 53-year-old gray-haired bookkeeper. A month ago, he took his two sons to register at Federal Plaza in Manhattan. The INS officials put them in handcuffs and held them overnight in a room with no chairs.

It turned out that Reza's application for permanent resident status had a technical glitch. It's the sort of problem,

immigration lawyers say, that would be easily remedied in better times. Reza faces deportation.

"My sons, 16 and 18, are on the roll of honors at their high school." Reza blinks and wags his head. "Actually, they are very worried.

"We love this country," he said. "Please tell me why we are being singled out."

'I Live in Fear of Police'

"An officer accused me of being terrorist. I live in fear of police and FBI raid . . . "

-- A grocery store packer

"I am a taxi driver, night shift, my boss threatens to fire me because he says I'm a terrorist."

-- Car service driver

"They chased me for three blocks and told me to go back where I came from or they would kill me."

-- A 13-year-old junior high school student

-- From city Human Rights commission surveys filled out by Pakistanis on

Coney Island Avenue

Bobby Khan turns the key and opens the door to the one-bedroom apartment and it's as though someone just left. A coffee grinder sits on the kitchen counter, the TV set stands in the living room, the air conditioner is plugged in. There is a phone list for Little Hands Pre-K and a saying from the Koran on the refrigerator: "Be Patient." Khan's friends, a father and mother, lived here for 10 years with their three U.S.-born children -- until they packed a few bags in February and took an overnight bus to Montreal.

These ghost apartments are scattered across Brooklyn and Queens. Families fled and friends now watch over the apartments, pay the rent for a few months, in hopes of -- what?

Khan shrugs. Dark-haired and bearded, with circle-rimmed eyes, he is a trained financial analyst who volunteers seven days a week as an interpreter and advocate for his embattled community. "They had been in New York 18 years," he says of his friends. "He was a cabdriver; I knew him from Pakistan. They were very happy, but their status was unclear. It's hard to think about leaving forever."

Qamar, the young man whose mom, dad and brother live in a Toronto motel, stops by his parents' apartment in a dowager of a prewar apartment building in Brooklyn's Bath Beach neighborhood each week. He runs the washing machine, waters the plants, looks at old photos. Sometimes he packs their clothes.

"My mom and I talked about it; they are fully Americanized but they can't leave my brother alone," said Qamar, who is married to a U.S. citizen. "When they are ready, I will close the apartment and drive their boxes up to them. This life is past."

That's hard for many to accept -- they see Little Pakistan as built of collective effort. Accountant Ashgar

Choudhri, dressed in tweed jacket and pants, with a plaid vest and a professorial aspect, recalls coming to Coney Island Avenue in the early 1960s. He found a desolate strip of walkups and storefronts, wedged between the Victorian houses of Flatbush and growing Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods of Midwood and Borough Park.

A mosque, the granddaddy of the present one, opened in a basement. Immigrants with degrees in engineering and accounting and medicine worked construction, drove taxis and hawked tabloids on the Brooklyn Bridge.

Many underwent the slow metamorphosis from tourist visa holder to green card to permanent resident status. About 40,000 became citizens. "When you return to Pakistan, I tell you, everyone can see you're not the same," Choudhri said. "You walk different. You talk different. You are an American."

By the 1990s, Pakistani dentists and obstetricians had busy practices. The halal butchers expanded to service the Orthodox Jews. Crime plummeted, and each Friday cops from the 70th Precinct allowed livery drivers to double-park so they could pray. On Pakistan Day in August, 10,000 people crowded onto Coney Island Avenue to listen as mayor and governor wished them well.

"My God, you don't know what it is to feel the freedom here," Choudhri said, slapping his battered brown leather briefcase for emphasis. "Freedom of speech, freedom of movement."

Which explains why those who fled are so reluctant to relinquish their homes. Regardless of status -- and some who fled are citizens -- they hope one day to trickle back. Those who remain wonder about the shape of that future. "I try to speak out for those who are being harassed," Choudhri said. "But sometimes I keep quiet now. Because you see" -- his smile is sheepish -- "I, too, am scared."

That Knock

She imitates the sound of knocking on her apartment door at 2 a.m. She recalls peering through the peephole and seeing two plainclothes detectives holding up their badges. She opened the door that night in December 2002, and her life changed.

The police wanted her husband, a car service driver and a grocery worker. He requested political asylum years earlier -- the application had languished. The detectives took him into detention a few days later. His home is a cell in New Jersey.

Razia Sultana has three children, ages 5, 6 and 10. A striking woman swathed in a periwinkle headdress, she personifies the economic impact of the two-year crackdown. She has no work permit, she has run up \$200 a month in charges for collect phone calls from her husband in prison, her rent is overdue. She cannot afford meat or new clothes; her Kashmiri butcher and Punjabi sari shop owner have lost a customer.

"Life was good and my husband worked very hard," Sultana said. "But to survive on our own -- New York is very hard."

The Islamic Circle of North America held a fundraiser on Coney Island Avenue two weeks ago that took in \$55,000 for 275 families whose men are in detention. "Sometimes we can pay the rent," said Adem Carroll of ICNA. "Sometimes we can give just enough to keep them in a state of misery."

In the way of immigrant communities, waves of misfortune in Brooklyn ripple through Lahore and Islamabad and dusty Indus River villages. Many Pakistani immigrants send dollars to relatives in Pakistan -- an illiterate

bricklayer who lived with three other men in an apartment on Ditmas Road in Brooklyn said he supported a family of nine in Pakistan.

Those who fled with their American nest eggs have fueled a housing boom in Islamabad, where prices have tripled. "This has never happened in Islamabad," said Imran Ali, a Pakistani Embassy official. "There are no jobs to support these lifestyles in Pakistan."

The Friday custom is well-established in Little Pakistan. As mosque services end, families stroll in search of a late-afternoon snack. Lazzat pizzeria sits across the street, a spotless, glass-lined eatery that promises customers, in no particular order, eggplant parmigiana, halal fried chicken, Lahori dall Chawal and baked ziti. A 52-inch satellite TV shows cricket and soccer matches.

This is Javed Chaudri's palace, and it's empty when it should be full.

"It is over," he said, waving a hand, wearily, at 13 empty tables. "I used to make \$1,800 in 24 hours -- now I make \$800. My chef was arrested six months ago, and he's gone back to Pakistan to start a construction business."

Chaudri climbed a well-worn immigrant ladder. He washed dishes, sold newspapers, drove a taxi. "I was 24 when I came here and I'm 40 now," he said. "I spent the prime of my life in struggle, and now my business goes down, down, down."

Would he return to Pakistan? He shakes his head without hesitation. Chaudri is a U.S. citizen, and his oldest son will graduate high school and go to college next year. He loves this country even if it's scared of him just now.

"America has been very good to us," he said. "I have kept my cab license. I will struggle and this will pass."