

A neighborhood in a fishbowl

ROBERT POLNER

Published in *Newsday* (New York)

August 2, 2005

Little Pakistan has lost plenty of residents since 9/11, and many who stayed behind are struggling to adapt

Along a stretch of Coney Island Avenue, butchered goats hang by their hooves in the rear of a grocery store, and a meaty white fish arrives from the home country every Friday for deep frying in the kitchens of South Asian restaurants. In this part of Brooklyn, lassi, a yogurt drink served salty or sweet, is at least as popular as Snapple.

While in some ways, life goes on as usual in Brooklyn's Little Pakistan, in many other ways, much has changed.

Probably no ethnic enclave, in a city chockablock with them, has drawn as much FBI and immigration-service investigation since 9/11. Merchants say the neighborhood is still staggering from the attention, while many residents fearfully anticipate a new wave of scrutiny by U.S. authorities in light of the recent terror attacks in London.

Leaving Little Pakistan

In the tense weeks after 9/11, federal agents began pounding on doors in the middle of the night and detained hundreds of Pakistanis in the Little Pakistan area. Thousands of people, gripped with fear, soon bolted. Many of them went to other states, back to their homeland, to Canada or even Western Europe.

Few have returned, by all accounts.

"No business anymore - it's dead here," said Pervaiz Saleem, who runs a South Asian grocery store on the Little Pakistan strip. "My customers, so many of them did get interrogated, were deported or just fled. People disappeared."

The post-9/11 exodus abated for a while, only to resume with a vengeance in the late fall of 2002, when the federal government began requiring noncitizen males from two dozen predominantly Muslim nations plus North Korea to check in with the immigration service - a process often described by critics as a catch-22, because for those lacking up-to-date visas, compliance with the "Special Registration" call-up proved to be at least as problematic as noncompliance.

Over the next year or so, about 13,000 Muslims found illegally living in towns and cities across the United States, their visas expired, were placed in deportation proceedings when they answered the special registration directive. Among them, the largest single nationality affected by the initiative was Pakistani. Authorities said they were looking, in part, for any ties between Islamic terrorists in Pakistan and the estimated 500,000 Pakistani immigrants residing in this country. About 120,000 Pakistanis live in New York City.

In the summer of 2003, a survey by the Council of Peoples Organization, a resettlement group on Coney Island Avenue, estimated that since 9/11, 18,000 Pakistanis left the Ditmas Park section of Brooklyn, which includes Little Pakistan, and the vicinity. The Pakistani embassy in Washington put the figure at 15,000.

More insular neighborhood

Now, Little Pakistan's mosque draws fewer and fewer worshipers. The public celebration of Muhammad's birthday each April is significantly smaller than before 9/11. Small-business owners struggle to make the rent, some going under, some reinventing themselves with new and less expensive offerings.

Khubaib Jilani, 57, said the Republican National Convention in Manhattan last summer brought new attention from law enforcement, further discouraging South Asian-born New Yorkers from traveling to the neighborhood to shop for ethnic foods, music and jewelry.

"It's like we got a bad name after 9/11, and we're stuck with it," said Jilani, who has stopped selling electronic merchandise in favor of 99-cent fare in an effort to stay afloat.

The bloody attacks against the London transport system have only refueled worries that South Asians and Arabs across New York and the United States will incur new suspicion and backlash.

"Everyone's scared," Mohammad Razvi, president of the Council of Peoples Organization, said shortly after the July 7 London explosions. "Women and girls in particular, given their mode of dress - their head scarves, for example - tell me that they feel they would be the first to be singled out for a hate crime or a deportation-type arrest. Some are actually afraid to go outside right now."

An uncertain future

Nonetheless, the community wants to be part of the New York mainstream, and on the Fourth of July made a strong showing of large American flags along Coney Island Avenue. "If we have to prove our patriotism, so be it - we will," Razvi said.

The FBI in New York said it has periodically met with Little Pakistan community leaders and has held forums in the neighborhood, including one recently to give people a chance to air grievances and hear about the agency's counterterrorism strategies. "We don't want to be seen as the enemy," said FBI spokesman Matthew Bertron.

There are other challenges to the community's long-term survival as well. In the last year, the Russian emigre community, long concentrated in Brighton Beach, has spread outward, with a few Russian businesses replacing faltering or abandoned Pakistani-owned ones on Coney Island Avenue.

"This community is not going to make a comeback anytime soon," said Kaiser Murbarak, 33, who, with his wife, owns what he described as a once-thriving and now struggling jewelry store.