



THE  TIMES

I want to be a rap star. But if my dad finds out . . .

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In his third report, our correspondent investigates Muslim segregation in Luton and integration in Bradford - and meets one man who personifies the dilemma

THIS IS AN admission of sorts: in my first four years of living in London, I never once visited Luton. Oh, like anyone who has flown with Ryanair or easyJet, I'd stumbled into Luton airport several times. I had, however, resisted all temptation to stay on board the Thameslink for one more stop. Then, two weeks into the war in Afghanistan in November 2001, I found myself disembarking at the downtrodden train station on a handful of occasions. It was, therefore, no surprise to find myself walking down Biscot Road towards the predominantly Muslim area of Bury Park once again at the end of April. It was three years since my last visit, and it was still raining in Luton.

Ever since September 11, Luton, home to around 25,000 adult Muslims — 70 per cent of them from the Mirpur district of Kashmir, the remainder predominantly Bangladeshi — has found its reputation marred by its repeated association with the War on Terror. In March, in raids across the South of England, police forces arrested a number of men suspected of attempting to use half a ton of ammonium nitrate to manufacture a bomb. A number of business and residential addresses in Luton were also searched.

More recently, Luton was plunged further into national notoriety by the case of 15-year-old Shabina Begum, who has not attended her local school in Denbigh since September 2002. Her refusal stems from a row over her desire to wear an ankle-length jilbab gown. While Begum lost her High Court battle in mid-June, the incident — in a school with a Muslim population of around 80 per cent — went some way to demonstrating Luton's increasingly segregated status in the South of England.

On my original visit in November 2001, I had arranged to meet the Luton-based branch of al-Muhajiroun, the religiously unreasonable and often publicity-hungry Muslim sect led by Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammad. Back then, Bakri's lieutenant, Anjem Choudary, boasted of sending groups of young men from the town to the Pakistani border city of Peshawar, then on to the Afghan border to fight with Taleban forces. Since those claims, al-Muhajiroun has intensified its stranglehold on Luton. While the organisation remains banned from entering the Central Mosque, its 50-odd members — in an act of revenge — regularly camp outside the eight local Muslim prayer halls to antagonise mainstream worshippers.

Economics and geography have much to do with the town's reputation as a centre of ethnic unrest. An overwhelming percentage of Luton's Muslims live in Bury Park, a litter-strewn enclave dominated by fast-food outlets and Pakistani takeaways near the centre of town. Bury Park's schools have an 80 per cent Muslim student majority.

Organised religion has similarly gained a stranglehold in Bury Park. In 1989, there were four *madrassas* (religious schools) in Luton; that number has since grown to 15. Around 20 per cent of the local Asian adult population is unemployed. Outside occasional retail jobs, most Muslims not working in London find work either in one of the 50-odd fast-food outlets in Bury Park, or one of the 40 minicab firms.

"There isn't much in Luton if you're young," says Tariq Shah, 23, an emcee in a local rap group, BPM Project. With his washing machine-clean white trainers and neat crew cut, Shah has all the gym-room athleticism you would expect of an amateur boxer. Most days, he helps his brother to sell accident insurance. I'd met him a few weeks earlier and, after he had kindly introduced me to his friends, we had kept in touch. We sit in the living/dining room of the semi that Shah shares with his parents on Biscot Road, awaiting the arrival of his break-dancing friend, Tanim Hussein, 24. As Shah plays the group's latest composition, *Urban Was The Tradition*, on an outdated boom-box — using an R&B beat, the song places the bona fide notion of a Muslim generation gap into a comedy skit — I look at his trophy collection. Alongside their DJ, Sunny, the group are to perform at Luton Carnival later in the afternoon.

"I haven't told my parents I'm doing this," grins Hussein on his arrival. He conceals his black BPM Project T-shirt underneath a sports top. Since the return of his parents from the haj, the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, in 2000, Hussein's father has become increasingly involved in his local mosque. After growing a beard, he announced a ban on music television from the family household. "A lot of people find religion after haj," Hussein says.

"I think for my father, though, it has replaced work. He's even on the board of the mosque now."

Standing a little over 5ft (1.5m) tall, Hussein makes up in sheer muscle what he lacks in height. He takes dance classes in London twice a week. And, while looking for full-time work, he spends any spare time at a local gym. He is, by some considerable degree, the more serious of the two. And over the previous few weeks Hussein has rung me on several occasions to discuss a number of issues. "When you were in Iraq, did you know this torture was going on?" he asked once. "Do the Americans know anything about how insulting it is for a Muslim to be naked?" Days later, he rings again. Although we start

discussing the merits of rap music — he is a traditionalist who opts for the old-school sound of the Eighties — the conversation quickly turns to the subject of women. “Asian girls, man,” he says, wearily. “They just give you so much attitude. They’re unapproachable.”

On the afternoon of Luton Carnival, though, as we walk down Biscot Road towards the main marquee, I put a hypothetical question to Hussein. What will he tell his parents if his group finds chart success? How will he explain his newly gained riches? He laughs: “I’d probably hide the money under my bed. Actually, no, I’d tell them I’d won the lottery.” Says Shah, sarcastically: “It’s Clark Kent/Superman syndrome. Tanim is one person when he’s at home and someone else once he gets out of his house.” As I look at Hussein for verification, he nods quietly, and is silent for the next few minutes.

Shah and Hussein have been friends since they were teenagers. On the surface, though, they have little in common besides music. While Shah has grown up against a liberal background, Hussein, a torrential talker, frets over every daily task he encounters — he is perpetually worried about the reaction of his religious parents. “We are quite different,” admits Shah. “But we talk about lots of things apart from music.”

Once in town, we wait for Hussein to finish changing in a fast-food takeaway. And on the way to the main parade we walk past a number of carnival processions — a rock and pop stage, clowns on stilts, a samba parade and a flatbed truck advertising an Asian wedding service. Shah and Hussein are looking for their soundstage, the site of their afternoon gig. Their disappointment is palpable as they discover a set of oversized speakers linked through a lamp-post to a set of turntables. The sound system, currently playing reggae and dub, isn’t ideal: it stands at a noisy crossroads near a railway bridge. “We’re never going to have a party here,” says Shah. “We’d asked for the main stage; we want all our friends to see us.” For the next hour we continue to bustle around town as the pair inform friends of their performance at 3pm.

Walking up to an R&B stage at the top of a small embankment, we stand listening as the DJ spins records by Missy Elliot and R. Kelly. Teenage girls rush to the foot of the stage, waving mobile phones and handbags. The boys, meanwhile, surly in their expressions, stand on a nearby pavement, indifferent to the allure of the young women dancing. Near me, some black kids sit on a pavement; the Asian teenagers, meanwhile, hover silently near by. “This sums up Luton,” says Hussein. “You have all the Asians standing here, blacks there and whites elsewhere. No one seems to be mixing at all.” ()

“It feels as if Luton has been under attack ever since September 11,” says Akbar Dad Khan, the director of Building Bridges, a local inter-faith project staffed by nine volunteers who promote Muslim-Christian dialogue by arranging meetings between local mosques and churches. Over tea and scones in his living room Khan, who proudly describes himself as an “integrationist”, recounts the problems that Muslims in Luton face. “Of course, we do have some extremists in our midst — al-Muhajiroun,” he says. “But they are a small group of around 40 young boys. Yet as far as Luton is concerned, al-Muhajiroun has been allowed to dominate the debate. It is time for the silent majority — law-abiding Muslims everywhere — to come forward and redress the balance.”

To demonstrate this, Khan recently organised a “Muslim March for Peace” through the streets of Luton. Around 500 attended. “We might be Muslim,” he says firmly, “but we are also British citizens. We have a part to play in the running of this country.”

The next time I meet him, though, over sandwiches and tea in a shopping centre, after the publication of more torture photographs from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, he appears subdued. “We can’t do this ourselves,” he says bitterly. “The Government also has to engage with the people. Muslims feel increasingly as if they are being victimised. You have these pictures being released from Abu Ghraib in Iraq; the militants use this as propaganda and it makes our job that little bit harder.”

The militants, indifferent to the community at large from behind their religious zeal, are undisturbed by Luton’s now-blighted reputation. While Khan has tried, on several occasions, to appeal to their parents’ sensibilities, he has been unsuccessful. And throughout the past three years, al-Muhajiroun’s declarations have become increasingly inflammatory. “Muslims unite to wage jihad,” was the chant outside Luton Central Mosque recently. “Jihad against Tony Blair.” While few worshippers take the group seriously, Luton suffers from a policy of inaction marked by fear. “I have had their parents tell me that they refuse to interfere because they are scared,” says Khan. “Yet the longer we ignore them, the more likely that something tragic might happen.”

In mid-June, I returned to Luton to attend a wedding. As I stood outside the community hall watching the bride and groom sit in silence, a gloom seemed to settle over the nuptials. Halfway through the ceremony, marked by the distribution of food and songs, as some guests stood smoking outside, the boys — they are always boys — from al-Muhajiroun came to a stop across the street. The group glanced up at the wedding party, then departed. “Luton is going from bad to worse,” says Irshad Asmatally, 30, a local youth worker. Dressed neatly in a light summer suit, Asmatally provided me with the most depressing assessment yet of the town. “Oldham and Bradford have had riots; it only makes sense that the same thing should happen here soon. We have all the same conditions here: unemployment, segregation and religious unrest.”

I recalled the afternoon of the Luton Carnival. The celebratory atmosphere aside, it was an occasion marked by the segregated groups of carnival-goers. After I’d seen BPM Project perform — Shah has an energetic rap style laced in braggadocio that evokes the memory of a young LL Cool J, while Hussein is a gifted break-dancer — we parted ways in town. “Stay cool, yeah?” says Shah. “Keep in touch. I’ll send you a single if it happens later this summer.”

I’d asked him what, if anything, he’d use his success for. “Bruv, we need a community centre,” he said immediately. “I’d like to have my own studio. Maybe I could lend the gear to other kids, y’know. It would be nice to give them a foot on to the ladder.” I assumed he was talking about Asian teenagers.

THE LAST TIME I visited Bradford, in July 2001, the city's residents were slowly recovering from a paralysis I have seen only after a full-scale metropolitan riot. On the previous evening, more than 300 young men — black, white and Asian — had assembled in the predominantly Asian area of Manningham after a week of rumours of an impending march by the National Front. In the violence that followed, the worst in Britain for nearly 30 years, nearly £27 million in damage was caused; the clashes directly injured around 220 police officers.

The next morning, alongside the detritus of fire-damaged vehicles, broken bottles and shattered windows, I also found a community that had, in contrast to the previous night's violence, started to turn on itself. Young people complained that their community elders, still burdened with the guest mentality common to first-generation immigrants to Britain, had stopped listening to them. Elders such as Zahid Hussain, 47, were equally unforgiving. "Young people here have no respect," he said angrily, arguing with a group of teenagers. "I told them to stop, but they wouldn't listen. Now look at what has happened here."

At the end of July 2001, West Yorkshire Police launched Operation Wheel, a criminal investigation into the riot that now stands as the largest of its kind in the UK. To date, 305 people have been arrested in connection with the riots; of them, 259 have been charged and 188 have received terms of imprisonment or youth detention. As recently as June 15, a judge sentenced Kamran Ijaz to nine years in prison — during his three-hour involvement in the riots, Ijaz was captured on CCTV throwing 14 missiles of different kinds, including two petrol bombs. ()

Yet some of the sentences have proved unduly harsh. Asam Latif, for example, received four years and nine months for lobbing six stones; Ashraf Hussain was sentenced to four years for throwing three stones; Istifar Iqbal was given 11 months for picking up, but not throwing, two stones.

Not all Bradford's Muslims — and many would describe themselves as more conservative than their contemporaries throughout the UK — disagree with the harsh sentences, though. "If you commit a crime, the punishment should be harsh," says Taj Hussain, 38, a maths teacher at a local secondary school. As we sit sipping coffee at the end of the school day, discussing the release of more photographs from Abu Ghraib, Hussain hesitantly tells me about his involvement in the city's previous riots, in 1995: he was held for three hours by police when he saw them roughly manhandling a young rioter.

"We should not accept this kind of loutish behaviour," he says. "It's contradictory to the teachings of Islam. I believe in integrating, but to a degree. And as Muslims living in Bradford, we have to do our bit."

In early May, during an unusually clear week of weather, I travelled to the Bradford suburb of Heaton to meet Shazad Ali, 24. A contemplative and extraordinarily handsome young man, Ali was captured on CCTV during his 20-minute "moment of madness". His recklessness got him a four-year stint: he was released last August after serving three years. "I was stupid, I know that," he told me, sitting near his mother at home one night.

After his release, Ali was fitted with an electronic tag, and put under a curfew outside the hours of 7am to 7pm until last January. Before jail, he had been studying for a BSc in computing at Bradford University. "It was hard coming out," he admitted. "I was depressed for a long time as I couldn't find a job. Going to jail really hits your confidence."

His mother, Sara, 43, was one of around 40 Bradford mothers who lobbied for fair jail sentences. "I really gave up with community leaders back then," she says. "They were no help at all. They just didn't know what to do. So it was left to us mothers to run the campaign for their children. I knew many of them were going to jail. But we wanted to make sure that they were treated fairly. They are the city's children. We have to make them part of the community again."

Ali arrived back from the kitchen with a tray laden with tea and biscuits, his little sister skipping around his legs. "He was quite fun-loving before all this," said his mother. "Now he seems very serious, as though he's taken responsibility for the whole family."

Since his release, Ali has found part-time work, counselling disadvantaged teenagers at the local YMCA. "I think that other people can learn from my experiences," he said.

For the first time in his life, he is working closely with whites. "I have never had that before. And what's weird is that we all have so much in common. I missed out on that when I was younger because all my friends were Asians and I was always made to believe that whites and Asians are so different."

Since July 2001, a small but steady trickle of renewal grants has leaked into Bradford's deprived areas. An educational initiative — the Linking Schools Project, set up in late 2001 — has spread to around 50 primary schools in the area, bringing white, Asian and black schoolchildren together each week. Under the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, schools receive around £1,000 each year for costs towards transport and tuition: children from a number of ethnicities and areas are united in the city's classrooms, museums and parks.

"You get children around here who never get to meet anyone from another neighbourhood. It's important that we catch them at a young age and have them interact with each other," says Angie Kotler, 47, the project's co-ordinator, as we drive up to Lister Park in Manningham. Once the epicentre of the 2001 riots, the area is now in the throes of modernisation thanks to the development of upmarket flats. At the end of June the Linking Schools Project will bring together

1,500 primary children from across Bradford into the park for a day of activities. Says Kotler: "What I tend to find surprising is that in many cases the children — and it doesn't matter where they're from — have so much in common."

Yet the riots, or rather their aftermath, have also provided the city's younger Muslim generation with a renewed confidence in their religious abilities. Kotler later introduces me to a young Muslim friend. Sofia Maskin, 22, has a degree in textiles design

from Leeds University and works in schools across the city. As we sit by the boating pond in Lister Park, Maskin, dressed in the orthodox manner of many young Bradford women, says she feels optimistic about the future of the city’s Muslim population.

“We still have a problem with jobs, we still have a problem with segregated communities and young people who don’t feel involved, but things are better than they were in 2001,” she says. Later, however, when the conversation turns to inter-racial marriages, she is surprisingly conventional. “I just think it’s wrong,” she says, after I inform her that the era of Muslim imams warning their flock off a “dilution of the Muslim gene pool” has, thankfully, been consigned to history.

Maskin looks unimpressed, adding that she does not agree with inter-racial marriages at all. In fact, in Bradford’s highly concentrated Muslim community, inter-racial unions are a rare sight: “I see Muslim boys going out with white girls all the time. They’re just interested in the physical aspect. I don’t think that’s the right way to live your life.”

We part with our disagreement intact. Later, when I speak to Philip Lewis, a lecturer in Peace Studies at Bradford University, and the author of several books on the city’s Muslim community, he laughs. “There is a core group of the younger generation that is heading back towards religion,” he says. “In cities such as Bradford, where multiculturalism has been promoted for so long – and, as the riots demonstrated, it ignored other, more substantial, problems – young British-born Muslims are looking for answers.”

Weeks later, wondering how he is faring with his counselling work at the YMCA, I ring Shazad Ali. His optimism, while dampened by the British National Party’s recent haul of four seats in council elections, sums up the spirit of a city working inch by inch to erase the still-burning memories of July 2001. “I’m really well. I’ve been offered a full-time job with the YMCA in September,” he says, happily. “It might even be able to help financially to get back to university next year.”

As he passes his mobile to his mother, I offer my congratulations. “Salaam,” she says. “Thank you. I’m proud of him. I’m trying to find a wife for him as well – he wants to get married.” She laughs and, knowing that I have been travelling around the UK for several weeks, tells me to keep a look-out for a suitable wife.

“Until now I’ve always felt as if everything has been working against us,” she says. “Now, for the first time in a long time, we seem to be moving in the right direction.”

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Burhan Wazir

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