

A Decade after 9/11, Little Pakistan Bounces Back

by {ga=ltung}

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Photo by Larry Tung Pakistani businesses line several blocks of Coney Island Avenue in the Midwood section of Brooklyn.

It was Mohammad Nadeem's stomach that led him to what would be his home away from home.

"I landed in JFK and asked a cab driver to take me to a Pakistani neighborhood," said Nadeem, a native of Pakistan who did not know anyone in New York. "I was hungry after a long flight. I wanted some Pakistani food."

The cab driver happened to be a fellow Pakistani. So he took Nadeem to this Brooklyn neighborhood on Coney Island Avenue between Avenues C and H where halal restaurants, grocery stores and pharmacies line the streets.

"It was completely by accident," said Nadeem of encountering a Pakistani cab driver. "Ten

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years later, he is still my friend."

"The neighborhood in the Midwood section that Nadeem eventually settled in is known as Little Pakistan. Its residents came under increased suspicion and scrutiny after 9/11, spurring many to leave New York and deterring other from moving here. After rough years, though, residents today see the prejudice waning and the community growing.

Creating Little Pakistan

This section of Brooklyn today is home to the largest Pakistani community in New York City. But before the barbershops and jewelry stores catering to South Asian customers dotted Coney Island Avenue, the neighborhood was primarily Jewish.

"Twenty or more years ago there was still a trace of earlier times: both commercially and populations," said [Jerome Krase](#), a sociologist and professor emeritus at Brooklyn College. "There were antique stores and shops that catered to previous residents such as upper-middle and middle-class Jews and a smattering of other white ethnic homeowners, renters and store owners such as Italians and Irish."

But by the 1990s, a wave of Pakistani immigrants has moved into the area, although the surrounding streets still are home to many Jews. According to census numbers, the number of Pakistani immigrants in Brooklyn went up from 4,949 in 1990 to 9,903 in 2000. The population doubled in the last decade and went up to 18,296. But unofficial numbers are higher as many undocumented immigrants are not counted. In the last decade, Pakistani-owned businesses started sprawling on Coney Island Avenue.

Turning Point

Then came 9/11. The devastating event put Pakistanis and several other ethnic groups under the spotlight. Federal and local agencies came into many South Asian and Muslim communities looking for suspicious aliens and sparking fear among residents.

"Before 911, you used to see hundreds of people walking on the streets," said Nadeem, now a shopkeeper at a grocery store at the corner of Coney Island Avenue and Glenwood Road. "The FBI came knocking on people's doors and asking questions. People were scared. Business

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dropped more than 50 percent."

Osama Kahlio, a medical technician and a native of Flatbush, had first-hand experience of discrimination even though he was not living in the United States on 9/11. His Pakistani-born parents had sent him to live in Pakistan so he could learn the language and culture.

"When I returned to New York for high school in 2005, I was constantly teased by my classmates because of my name," said Kahlio, who is 23 and will attend Brooklyn College. "There was a lot of peer pressure. It wasn't physical stress but a lot of mental stress.

Unfriendly Environment

In September 2002, the Department of Homeland Security launched a special registration system, the [National Security Entry-Exit Registration System](#) or NSEER, requiring male citizens over 16 years of age from 25 countries -- mostly Muslim countries in Africa and Asian -- to register with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Although the system was [terminated](#) in April 2011, many law-biding Pakistani immigrants fell victim to it.

"All of a sudden there was a sweep of almost 500 people in the community," said Mohammad Razvi, who started the [Council of Peoples Organization](#) or COPOUSA, a non-profit community organization that supports South Asian communities, in the wake of 9/11. "It was basically based on names. Persons with names like Mohammad or Amid. Many people were swept up under suspicion."

Razvi said many people faced deportation proceedings over minor immigration issues such as failure to report a change of address to immigration authorities.

"It's catch 22. You are damned if you go and you are damned if you don't," said Razvi.

Those affected included people waiting for a decision on their [Legal Immigration and Family Equity Act](#), or LIFE petition, which helps some individuals who would not normally qualify for permanent residence to obtain

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a green card.

"Even though they filed the petition and were waiting for the judge's decision," said Razvi. "they were still picked up and put into deportation proceeding because they don't have permanent residency yet."

Leaving New York

During the height of the sweep, more than 20,000 people in Brooklyn's South Asian communities left the United States, a COPO survey found. Many sought political asylum in Canada and Australia, and some returned to Pakistan and other countries. A number of them never returned.

"Some people did come back from Canada but very limited," noted Razvi. "But those who stayed in Canada are living the American dream there." He added that a neighbor who used to own a barbershop is now running a successful business in Toronto and has purchased a big house.

Nadeem, the shopkeeper, also tried his luck elsewhere. He moved to Pennsylvania and Massachusetts briefly in 2005 but eventually returned to Midwood.

"I love this city," said Nadeem. "This is where I can live a similar life like back home."

Building Bridges

Like many other ethnic enclaves in the city, the Pakistani community in Midwood had been insular and quiet. But 9/11 pushed residents to step outside of their comfort zone.

Razvi said one of COPO's missions is to promote understanding and help community members integrate into the mainstream society. Among the organization's many services, English as a second language has topped the list. Citizenship classes, healthcare education and legal services are also popular.

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But despite such efforts, the community remains under the shadow of 9/11, said Razvi,

To try to address that his organization recently held a youth conference in the hopes of building a better relationship between community youth and federal and local law enforcement agencies.

"More than 500 kids came in," said Razvi. "The purpose was to build a bridge and remove the stigma that all the law enforcement agencies do is to knock on your door and arrest your parents and cousins. They are also here to protect you, and there are job opportunities for you as well."

Bouncing Back

Despite the lingering effects in the community, Little Pakistan is flourishing again with booming business. According to Nadeem, at least four restaurants in the area are open 24 hours a day. In addition, his employer just opened another grocery store a few blocks down the street to serve more customers. Some 50,000 Pakistanis now live in New York.

"People are coming back," said Nadeem. "And I see new Pakistani families shopping in our store every week."

And the new generation is optimistic.

"It's like everywhere. Look at Vietnam and Japan," said Kahlio, the medical technician, referring to the discrimination against Vietnamese and Japanese immigrants during and after the Vietnam War and World War II. "It will take time. Hopefully the prejudice will go away someday."