A glimpse of the UK Bangladeshi community

One industry survey shows that each week three million people eat at Indian restaurants, spending around GBP 5 billion a year. The earnings from this industry are around GBP 3.5 billion annually. Out of the estimated 8,500 so-called Indian restaurants in the UK about 90% are owned and run by Bangladeshis. Most of the workers, even those in restaurants run and owned by Indians or Pakistanis, are Bangladeshis.

MD. ANWARUL KABIR

"IN 1925, an early settler had been hungry, thirsty, cold and lost in London. He was desperately looking for his own people. He asked a policeman for help. The policeman replied: 'I don't know. You better go on until you smell curry.'"

This quotation is from Adams Caroline's book, titled: "Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers," on the sub-continental settlers in the UK. I am not quite sure how long the gentleman had to walk before meeting his own people as at that time there were not many sub-continental restaurants around.

But in time, especially after the Second World War, the scenario has changed dramatically. Nowadays, if you pass through almost any city or town in the UK -- whether on foot or by car -- and if your sense of smell is moderately sharp then the exotic scent of sub-continental food is almost certain to tickle your nostrils.

In fact, during the last three decades, the food habits of the British people have changed too. Some years ago, a survey carried out by the Daily Mirror found that chicken tikka had driven out fish and chips, replacing what was for a long time the most popular dish in the UK. This popular food in Britain, chicken tikka, is of course cooked in so-called "Indian" restaurants.

Chicken tikka, chicken korma, vindaloo, madras, and so on, are by now so popular that even the most prestigious dictionaries include these names as English words in their latest edition. Day by day the number of curry-hackers is increasing. To go out at weekends is in most cases synonymous with going for 'an Indian' at some point in the evening.

The UK without curry houses? Many people would rather die than face that horrible reality. One industry survey shows that each week three million people eat at Indian restaurants, spending around GBP 5 billion a year. The earnings from this industry are around GBP 3.5 billion annually.

The question is what, or who, lies behind the chicken tikka? What is the reality behind the facade of the chintzy Indian restaurants? Where have they come from? Amazingly, most native British people do not know the answers. A survey, conducted by the writer, of the customers of the "Indian" restaurants in Swansea, UK, suggests that even now more than 60% people eating curries and chicken tikkas have no real idea.

Among the interviewees of this survey, 27% believed that Swansea's curry houses are run by Indians, 10% thought Pakistanis, and17% admitted they were confused. Less than half, 46%, gave the right answer. Out of the estimated 8,500 so-called Indian restaurants in the UK about 90% are owned and run by Bangladeshis. Most of the workers, even those in restaurants run and owned by Indians or Pakistanis, are Bangladeshis.

Why is it that so many people are still not aware of the massive involvement of Bangladeshis in the UK curry business? Part of the reason is historical. Pioneer Bangladeshi restaurateurs first opened their restaurants when Bangladesh was still a part of British India and, therefore, called them "Indian." The end of British rule in the Indian sub-continent in 1947 saw the emergence and formation of two independent states, India and Pakistan. Pakistan was divided into East and West wings. For obvious reasons, at that time, the people of this region (i.e. East Pakistan) were known as Pakistanis. Perhaps, the identity transformation of Bangladeshi community (from Indians to Pakistanis and then to Bangladeshis) has made the common British people confused.

Bangladeshi chefs in the UK continue to show their inventiveness as before by creating new dishes. Most of the new recipes are adopted from different parts of the Indian sub-continent and altered to suit the taste of native British people. The use of sub-continental menus, and the naming of the restaurants after historical Indian celebrities and famous Indian places (e.g. Lal Qila, Shahjahan), sometime mislead customers.

But it is high time that Bangladeshi restaurants in the UK are identified as Bangladeshi restaurants. Bangladesh is no longer a part of India or Pakistan. In fact, these restaurants should be treated as unofficial embassies of Bangladesh as they can play a vital role in representing Bangladesh to Western Europe.

In the UK, among the ethnic minorities, the Bengali-speaking people are the fourth largest group, and among the immigrant South Asian groups, the Bangladeshi community is ranked third (after the Indian and Pakistani communities). According to the 2001 census, the number of UK Bangladeshis is about 300,000. However, based on this census and the influx of new immigrants, the number of Bangladeshis at present in the UK can be estimated to be 400,000.

UK Bangladeshis are a relatively homogeneous ethnic group and the vast majority of these settlers (probably about 90%) came from one particular region of Bangladesh. Most of them are Muslims of the Sunni persuasion. Coming mainly from Sylhet division, these Bangladeshis are also known as Sylheti.

Like the Mirpuri settlers from Pakistan, the kinship among the Sylheti people is very strong, and even in the UK they have preserved their own Sylheti dialect. About the Sylheti dialect, ethnic minority researcher R. Chalmers has pointed out: "The Sylheti dialect is very rich and distinctive and reflects various influences, such as Assamese, Arabic, Turkish, Nagri, Parsi etc. This exclusiveness of their (i.e. Sylheti people's) dialect has given them a regional identity which continues in their efforts to keep marital relationships within the same cultural background."

Understanding the importance of the Sylheti language among the UK Bangladeshi community, the various organisations translate their official documents into both standard Bangla and Sylheti languages.

The Sylheti people also have a significantly different culture from the other parts of Bangladesh for historical reasons. In the past, they had more affinity with the Assamese than the Bengalis, as Sylhet had a long history as part of Assam (a province of India).

Before the 14th century, Sylhet was a Hindu dominated area and most of the people followed the Hindu religion and were influenced by the Assamese, Bengali, and Hindu culture. But in the second half of the 14th century, when the Arabian Muslim saint Hazrat Shah Jalal and his 360 companions (known as Awolias) migrated to Sylhet through Delhi with a view to promoting Islam and protecting the local Muslim minority from the oppression of the Hindu King Gour Govinda, the cultural practice of the Sylheti people started to change.

Because of the influence of these saints, most of the people started converting to Islam. Eventually this shaped a hybrid Sylheti culture (a mixture of Islamic, Arabic, Assamese, and indigenous Hindu culture.) In fact, the fellow feeling due to Sylheti culture and dialect among the Sylheti people prompted the chain migration process of Bangladeshis to the UK and this is why the majority of the Bangladeshis there are from Sylhet.

Pioneer Bangladeshis started to cross "kalapani" (black water or sea) and entered the UK as seamen (known as Jahazi or Lascar) at the end of the 18th century. Most of the Indian seamen (about 70-75%) at that time were from Sylhet. However, these pioneers did not settle in the UK and their main objective was to accumulate enough money to lead better lives in their home villages. Some of these pioneers, in later phases, though unintentionally, were bound to settle in the UK for various reasons. However, these settlers were not significant in number.

Research conducted by Gwynor Hughes has revealed that throughout and after the First World War some Sylheti seamen settled in Britain -- approximately 200 in major port cities such as London, Cardiff, and Liverpool. During the Second World War, as Hughes has reported, thousands of Sylheti seamen died at sea, fighting for the British and allied forces. After the war, hundreds of injured Sylheti seamen settled in the UK (mainly in Brick Lane, London). Eventually, they sponsored their relatives to join them as the UK, at that time, required more workers to rebuild its war-torn economy.

A large number of Bangladeshis, along with other South Asians, started to immigrate to the UK to fill the labour shortage which opened up during the post-war industrial boom of the UK economy. Most of them worked in different industries, mainly in garment factories in the big cities like London, Birmingham, and Manchester.

Yousuf Chowdhury, historian of the Bangladeshi community in the UK in his book: 'The Roots and Tales of the Bangladeshi Settlers,' has pointed out that though Bangladeshis started to enter into the catering business as early as 1938, the large scale involvement of Bangladeshis in catering only began in the early 1970s and gained momentum during the economic recession and de-industrialisation of the UK that started from 1980 and onwards. Now, the majority of Bangladeshis in the UK are either directly or indirectly dependent on the catering business.

Slowly and steadily, the Bangladeshi community in the UK as a whole is progressing towards a promising future. The second generation of this community are the children of British soil and are coming forward to lead the society. However, many members of the second generation are not taking interest in the catering business as they are joining the mainstream job market in various capacities. But some of them will still carry the flag, and with their enthusiasm and innovation, will add a new dimension to the Bangladeshi restaurants.

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China's wealth woes

The good news was that the closed system inoculated China against the rush of global capital that toppled banks across Asia in the crisis of 1997-98. The bad news: banks had no competitive incentive to learn proper risk management, or to introduce modern retail banking or consumer lending. Now the system is such a mess that China fears to open it. And it sits on a huge pile of idle dollars that its own banks are unable to employ fully at home. All of which speaks to a fundamental dilemma: who wants to be a trillionaire? China does, for sure, but it is also increasingly aware of the burdens of wealth.

GEORGE WEHRFRITZ

SOMETIME over the next few weeks, a shipment of lawn furniture, brake pads, lamps or the like is going to make history. The manufacturer, one among tens of thousands churning out product 24/7 in China's humming coastal cities, will fill an order bound for the United States, take payment in American dollars and add a 12th zero to Beijing's foreign reserve -- pushing the tally over the $1 trillion mark. Neither buyer nor seller will realize the transaction's significance, and barring an unforeseen shock to the global trading system, China's reserve will continue to rise by roughly $17 billion a month.

Beijing's growing dollar hoard represents the most dangerous imbalance in today's global economy. The United States is both importing heavily from China and borrowing heavily from the country to finance those purchases, pushing the dollar down and putting the two economic superpowers on a collision course. Washington politicians demand that Beijing raise the value of the yuan against the dollar, and Chinese officials have hinted that if pushed too hard they might shift their near-trillion-dollar reserve out of US Treasury bonds, which could trigger a US and global recession. The main thing preventing this confrontation is the fact that both sides have too much to lose. Former US Treasury secretary Lawrence Summers once called this "the balance of financial terror." What has gone widely unremarked is that, increasingly, this balance is threatening China as much as the United States.

The United States has been worrying for the past 25 years about a mounting trade deficit and the threat it poses to America's financial pre-eminence. But China now views its surplus with growing alarm, too. Its dollar mountain reflects huge demand for Chinese goods and the Chinese currency needed to buy those goods. In mid-2005, Chinese officials, under intense pressure, did allow the renminbi to rise slightly, by just over 2 percent, but they fear -- with some reason -- that to go further could undermine their export competitiveness and lead to bankruptcies. Speculators, however, are betting that China will have no choice. The global market assumption that the renminbi is destined to rise is now "the key problem" for China's economy, warned the head of the National Bureau of Statistics, Qiu Xiaohua. "It is fair to say that China is actually fighting a game against worldwide speculative capital. If not handled properly, this will damage the national interest and endanger economic security."

In an economy that, for all its might, is still in the developing stage, it is no small trick to absorb $17 billion a month without destabilizing consequences. The cash is leaching into the economy, fueling growth of 11.3 percent in the second quarter, the fastest rate since 1994, threatening a meltdown. And every solution begets new problems: China has tried command economics, like simply ordering banks to grant fewer loans or publicly denouncing provincial officials who spend too recklessly, but that undermines its efforts to reform the banking sector using the market. It has tried raising interest rates, which can restrain growth but also attracts more dollars -- from investors seeking returns, not import buyers -- and weakens domestic demand. "They're in a trap," says Ronald McKinnon, a Stanford University economist, in reference to China's surging exports and undervalued currency. "And there isn't an easy way out."

Beijing works hard to dampen or "sterilize" the impact of the incoming dollars on the domestic economy. To do this, the People's Bank of China (the central bank) buys dollars from commercial banks for renminbi-denominated bonds, then limits how much the banks can lend. Yet it's no coincidence, economists say, that investments in fixed assets, from roads to real estate, have shot up in tandem with the foreign-currency reserve since 2000. "This will be the sixth successive year in which investment rises more rapidly than the underlying economy," says Nicholas Lardy, a senior fellow at the Institute for International Economics in Washington. "Not a sustainable recipe for growth."

Another embarrassment of China's rising fortune is that it has begun to undermine financial reforms launched a decade earlier. To make banks more market-oriented, Beijing has discouraged politically motivated lending to debt-laden state enterprises, welcomed minority foreign partners and made bank chiefs accountable for their profits and losses. Yet the People's Bank also undercuts those profits when it forces banks to help sterilize dollars by buying low-interest renminbi-denominated bonds. Regulators also set real interest rates artificially low (currently under 3 percent) to deter the "hot money" betting on a yuan revaluation, but that cheap money flows into new factories and property developments. "Wholly or partially state-owned enterprises continue to receive most of the funding," says a new study by McKinsey & Co, noting that the pattern "not only explains the large volume of nonperforming loans in China's banking system but also decreases the economy's overall productivity."

Beijing is justifiably worried that any significant rise in the value of its currency could create psychological momentum for more appreciation. "The more people buy into the argument, the worse it gets," says Nicholas Kwan, regional head of economic research at Standard Chartered Bank in Hong Kong. "By the time (the renminbi) reaches the point where everyone thinks it has risen enough, they're in big trouble." But the longer Beijing keeps its currency artificially low, argues Lardy, the more capital will be misallocated into marginal investments, the slower banking reforms will progress and the costlier the bill for nonperforming loans in the financial system will ultimately be. Lardy figures (conservatively) that the renminbi is undervalued by about 15 percent, and says that if the currency were actually allowed to rise that much, many of the investments now being made in China would be pushed into the red.

Why not simply spend the dollar reserve? That's what Japan did in the '80s and early '90s, when its export surplus was mounting and its top corporations and tycoons bought everything from Hollywood studios to impressionist masterpieces. Indeed, Chinese experts are mulling spending ideas, mostly of a far less glamorous sort, from building a strategic petroleum reserve at a cost of $30 billion to forming a Chinese Peace Corps, with thousands of humanitarian workers. But none of that, economists say, is enough to significantly slow the growth of China's foreign reserves. "The problem with these ideas is that you can't actually spend much money on them," says Stephen Green, head economist for Standard Chartered in Shanghai. "They don't have many choices."

Still, China is trying to spend down at least some of its trade surplus by investing abroad. Beijing's model here is Singapore, which spends its own huge trade surplus (in excess of 10 percent of GDP) on things like telecoms and ports abroad, says Kwan. "The Singaporean way is not to hold too many T-bills, but to buy stock in Microsoft or banks in Indonesia." Now Beijing is encouraging Chinese insurance companies and pension funds to invest $8.3 billion in foreign bonds and securities, and urging others to buy up strategic raw materials, particularly petroleum reserves, in places like Africa.

The catch here is that, as an emerging giant, China can't fly under the global radar like tiny Singapore. Witness what happened when Chinese oil giant CNOOC tried to buy Unocal last year, only to be run off by US congressional opposition. This kind of backlash against Chinese acquisitions is likely to rear its head again, even though it offers a solution to today's huge trade imbalance.

So China continues to park the bulk of its reserve in US Treasury bills, the bonds in which creditors hold most of America's huge public debt. China now owns some $330 billion worth, second only to Japan's $640 billion. Thus China fuels American consumption, not the emergence of a Chinese consumer market that could drive long-term growth.

The roots of this contradiction go back to the early 1980s and the start of reform in China, when the late patriarch Deng Xiaoping opened the manufacturing sector, but not the banks, to foreign investors. The good news was that the closed system inoculated China against the rush of global capital that toppled banks across Asia in the crisis of 1997-98. The bad news: banks had no competitive incentive to learn proper risk management, or to introduce modern retail banking or consumer lending. Now the system is such a mess that China fears to open it. And it sits on a huge pile of idle dollars that its own banks are unable to employ fully at home.

All of which speaks to a fundamental dilemma: who wants to be a trillionaire? China does, for sure, but it is also increasingly aware of the burdens of wealth.

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New world order?

Originally, Lebanon was created on the Sanjak of Mount Lebanon for the Maronite Christians by their French sympathizers in 1926. Earlier, the Maronites had added the coastal towns of Tyre, Sidon, Tripoli, and Beirut. Later, they also added the fertile Bekaa Valley (Baalbek, Bekaa, Rashayya, and Hashabyya) from the Vilayet of Damascus with the active support of their French sympathizers. Syria was left with the Vilayets of Damascus and Aleppo.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

A truce has come into effect. But Lebanon lies devastated and occupied. The month-long Israeli offensive has killed Lebanese civilians by the thousands.

Lebanon's woes lie in its demographic composition of a compartmentalized patchwork of religious communities. The southern half of Lebanon, bordering Israel, is Shiite, or Hizbollah, territory. The Shiites are also firmly placed in a major part of the strategic Bekaa valley bordering Syria. In Beirut, the Shiites live in the southern quarter. The Shiites, who constitute 26% of the total population of Lebanon, have been transformed by Iranian influence, and by the disciplined and supportive activities of Hizbollah. The appearance of a charismatic and spirited leader in Hassan Nasrollah has further helped their cause. That the Shiites did not have a pleasant experience during the eight years of Israeli occupation also helped. The Israelis had a tough opponent in Hizbollah and the toll was rising. It made even Ariel Sharon choose the discreet option.

Israel has used its full might, and that too over a period of more than one month. The David and Goliath contest has apparently benefited Hizbollah more than Israel. Its constancy has received recognition in spite of the havoc wrought on its civilian population. By all accounts Israel's drive against the Hizbollah for the recovery of their soldiers was disproportionate, to say the least. This is evident in the colossal destruction of residential quarters, public utilities, and the collateral killing of well over one thousand innocent civilians. Israel operated on the theory that every Shiite residential area is a hide-out of Hizbollah.

The motive was much larger than the recovery of the soldiers. It was quite clear that Israel was hell-bent upon pummelling Hizbollah into pulp. For Israel, it amounted to sanitizing its northern border. To the south, in the Gaza strip, Hamas has been cowed down. On the east, a wall spanning the entire border with the West Bank is nearing completion. The Hamas leaders are on the back foot. Hamas's relationship with Mahmud Abbas and his Fatah is showing signs of strain. The sanitizing job is on course. Hizbollah is badly mauled and Hamas has been pushed into a corner where the blame of public distress lies on it.

Only a greater goal justifies the massive Israeli offensive in Lebanon. In its simplest form, Israel may be precluding, once and for all, the necessity of undertaking such exercises in future. Israel wants to make its own peace, and on its own terms, and certainly a lasting one. The best time for it is when the price of peace is as low as it could be. The best time is when the other side is down on the ground, and there is no respite for them in sight. To stretch it further, when even the opponent's patron or patrons are in a tight corner, and before the prospect of taking them (the opponents) on becomes perilous. Hizbollah and Hamas are badly battered. Syria is in a tight corner and Iran is treading carefully in view of the gradually stiffening stand of the western powers against its nuclear program.

Israel will now want to validate the situation. United States has much bigger problems in Iraq and Afghanistan. The breakdown of the ethno-religious pact in Iraq is showing no signs of improvement. It has a League of Nations scenario that led to the creation of five states in the Middle East. Under the British trusteeship, three countries, Iraq, Jordan and Israel were created out of the Vilayets (provinces) of the Ottoman Empire.

The British showed their excellence in drawing the borders of countries by creating Iraq out of the Vilayets of Mosul (having non-Arab Kurds), Baghdad (with a large Sunnite population), and Basra (with a Shiite majority.) Faisal, the younger son of Sharif Huseyn, the then custodian of Mecca and Medina was installed as the King of Iraq in return for Sharif Huseyn's support against the Ottoman Turks. The French, in the battle of Maysalun Pass earlier, drove him out from Damascus in July 1920. Sharif Huseyn's eldest son, Abdullah, was installed as the King of TransJordan, constituting of territories south of the Vilayet of Damascus, and territories annexed from the northern part of Hijaz of today's Saudi Arabia.

Israel, as agreed in Sykes-Picot Treaty between the British and the French, was created out of the Sanjak (autonomous region) of Jerusalem and territories south of the Vilayet of Beirut. Originally, Lebanon was created on the Sanjak of Mount Lebanon for the Maronite Christians by their French sympathizers in 1926. Earlier, the Maronites had added the coastal towns of Tyre, Sidon, Tripoli, and Beirut. Later, they also added the fertile Bekaa Valley (Baalbek, Bekaa, Rashayya, and Hashabyya) from the Vilayet of Damascus with the active support of their French sympathizers. Syria was left with the Vilayets of Damascus and Aleppo.

In a repetition of history, this time the United States is engaged in Iraq and the French have to salvage Lebanon. It is a fact that the Hizbollah militia is not Lebanon's national army. Israel's final goal does not have any place for a hostile militia firmly entrenched as Lebanon's defender of sovereignty in place of a national army. The task of developing an effective Lebanese national army will take time. For Lebanese nationhood is yet to develop as a strong binding force. It remains to be seen whether France will commit itself to this task. It has to enlist the support of the Sunnite Arab states, but they have a united stand against Shiite domination in Middle East.

Now the only road in President Bush's road map for the Middle East is pointing towards Beirut. The heat is on the government of Lebanon. They will have to put their act together. Possibly, the Sunnite government and the Maronite president will be lumped together for taking part in developments leading to an agreement with Israel that will permanently sanitize its southern border. This is Israel's chance for a lasting settlement. They are bent on not letting it go. Israel knows from its experience that it cannot stay in Lebanon indefinitely. It wants to do the business quickly, and for that it means creating a situation which will compel the European powers to act.

What Israel has done in the last one month in conducting its military campaign could not recover their soldiers, nor could it nab the captors. It targeted the Shiite areas and in some cases the Sunnites as a matter of association. They used massive force as a means of flushing out the Hizbollah men, and in wreaking primitive vengeance on the organization. Use of such brute force is only seen in combats of modern warfare. The havoc of destruction and the collateral killing of innocent civilians, both in Lebanon and in Gaza, are apocalyptic in degree.

It is difficult to gauge the morale of Hizbollah and Hamas members, but the civilian populace in Lebanon and the milling Palestinians in the ghettoes of Gaza have been traumatically terrorized. Israel's operation "summer rain" has crippled the power system of the Gaza strip. A 360 sq km area, containing 1.3 million people, has been reduced to an abject condition. The residents of Gaza now get 6-8 hours of electricity and 2-3 hours of water supply. Israel maintains strict restrictions on the Rafa exit point. Even efforts by Egypt to restore the power system, with support from Islamic Development Bank, are running into Israeli obstacle.

Gaza, in the words of its residents, has become a giant prison. The miserably poor people of Gaza, with a per capita income of $2 dollar per day, are living in a reign of terror. When a state indulges in acts of terror, the suffering the innocents endure has a stranglehold. This amounts to stretching self-defence too far, beyond the limits of civilized existence.

The League of Nations has left a legacy of injustice in the Middle East. It is not within the means of the UN to roll back the injustice, but it should assert what it has set out to maintain. The inviolability of territorial integrity is an important cornerstone in international peace and a civilized world order.

The sanctions following the non-compliance of UN resolution worked for Libya, and Iran is being threatened with the same. But in the case of non-compliance by Israel, the UN is caught in paralytic torpor. The selective use of the UN is dangerously eroding its credibility. It is a matter for concern, because countries wronged will have no place to look to for justice. The super-powers have their own geo-political interests to look after.

The UN should be stabilized for the maintenance of balance in world order. Otherwise, frustration and desperation will have many rebels to contain.