

# Reflections on the contribution of Muhammad Anwar to the study of sociology and racial politics

Ethnicities

0(0) 1–8

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DOI: 10.1177/1468796820975152

[journals.sagepub.com/home/etn](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/etn)**Tahir Abbas** 

Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University,  
The Hague, Netherlands

## Abstract

Muhammad Anwar passed away on 11 June 2019, at the age of 75 after 50 years of research and policy development in the area of race and ethnic studies. In this article, I explore his numerous contributions, including his important work, *The Myth of Return: Pakistanis in Britain*, published in 1979. His interest in politics and, in particular, participation, and representation within it, led to *Race and Elections*, published in 1994. His subsequent works on identifying the intergenerational differences among British Pakistanis, who also happen to represent a significant proportion of British Muslims, developed into his final major book, *Between Cultures*, published in 1998. I explore the nature of his contribution, the impact that it had in the field of race and ethnic studies, and the research openings generated for other scholars to expand on his social anthropological and sociological emphasis on better understanding the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities and the need to better develop policies to alleviate ethnic and racial disadvantage.

## Keywords

Muhammad Anwar, obituary, sociology, racial politics, Pakistanis in Britain

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## Corresponding author:

Tahir Abbas, Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University, The Hague, Netherlands.

Email: [t.abbas@fggaleidenuniv.nl](mailto:t.abbas@fggaleidenuniv.nl)

## His life and work

Muhammad Anwar was born in Pakistan. He obtained a Bachelor's degree in Social Sciences (1965), and a Master's in Sociology (1967) at the University of Punjab in Lahore. He then went on to become a Lecturer in Sociology at the Government College in Peshawar. He took an opportunity to move to Britain in 1970 to continue with his studies, first completing a Master's degree at Manchester University (1971) and then a PhD at Bradford University (1977) (Anwar, 1977). His PhD became his first book in 1979 (Anwar, 1979). It was during this period, from the early 1970s onwards, that he began to take an active interest in the political and cultural life of Pakistanis and Muslims in the north of England. Throughout the decade, he was a regular presenter on the BBC Sunday morning programme, *Nai Zindagi Naya Jeevan* ('new life' in Urdu and Hindi), which ran from 1968 to 1982. A regular BBC slot for many South Asian households on Sunday mornings, it was the only television programme that catered for the needs and wants of Britain's growing South Asian populations and, for that reason alone, it was hugely popular.

Binding race relations legislation was introduced in 1968 (Race Relations Act, 1968) but a few months earlier, Enoch Powell made his now infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech given to members of the Conservative Party in the Midland Hotel in Birmingham. Edward Heath, however, dismissed Powell from his position as Shadow Defence Secretary. Anwar realised the importance of getting involved in community development affairs as a way in which to support issues of integration, multiculturalism, and diversity, which were still hotly debated concepts, both in academia and policy settings. Anwar's doctoral research stressed the importance of understanding the cultural and political value systems among Pakistani communities in the north of England. These norms are also based on the need, want, and desire to hold onto certain norms and values associated with the 'sending' regions before migration, some of which remained important in determining aspects of the social and cultural capital of groups facing various hostilities, including racism and discrimination. But at the same time, he remained conscious of the need to remain sensitive to inward-looking sensibilities that could grow in the context of wider social vacuums. Reactions to structural and cultural barriers that prevent effective integration could lead to an inward-looking mindset, adding to greater pressures of exclusion combined with negative media and political attention from dominant majority society that sees such groups as living parallel lives.

During the 1970s, Anwar supported the Pakistani community in Rochdale by assisting with newly arriving immigrants, helping to find housing for new arrivals, as well as supporting wider social security concerns before joining the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) in London in 1981. Throughout his time at the CRE, he was involved in managing and delivering a whole host of social research projects with a specific spotlight on race (in)equality and practice. He was actively involved in pushing forward original research to identify cases of racial discrimination and disadvantage and to keenly support institutions introducing measures to help

generate equality and diversity solutions, including for the BBC and the Office for National Statistics. In particular, he helped to push for the need to introduce ethnic categories in the Census, which first came into play in 1991. After being the Head of Research at the CRE for most of the 1980s, he joined the University of Warwick in 1989 as the Director of the Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, a position that he held until 1994.

Author and co-editor of numerous publications, including *Between Two Cultures* (1976), *The Myth of Return* (1979), *Race and Politics* (1986), *Black and Ethnic Leaderships* (1991, co-edited with Pnina Werbner), *British Pakistanis: Demographic, Social and Economic Position* (1996), *Between Cultures* (1998), *From Legislation to Integration* (1999, co-edited with Patrick Roach and Ranjit Sondhi), and many others, he was awarded an OBE for services to education in 2007. He retired in 2012 as Emeritus Professor of the University of Warwick's Department of Sociology.

### **The research contribution**

Badr Dayha (1973) wrote of his observations in the city of Birmingham, first in 1956, and then during the mid-1960s when he carried out his study identifying the processes through which a relatively closed rural society migrates to an open post-industrial city and faces all sorts of challenges of adaptation and adoption that require, in this case, Pakistanis in the north and the midlands in the 1970s to organise themselves in response to wider structural issues, but also to activate various levels of an agency concerning education, business, and community organisation. Dayha's research acted as a foundation for a more localised study that Anwar carried out in Rochdale in the late 1970s. The most significant contribution Anwar made to the sociology of ethnic relations was his 1979 book based on his PhD carried out at the University of Bradford.

The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act prevented the arrival of male pioneers as a form of chain migration, resulting in the formation of communities that had to cater to the needs of families, including due to the arrival of wives, fiancés, children, and other family members as part of the general pattern of family unification. Until then, it was a 'chain migration produced by close control of movements by sponsorship via kinship-friendship network[s]' (King, 1980). Studying the position of Pakistanis from the Punjab and Mirpur regions, which made up the significant concentrations of the group in Rochdale, Anwar's research demonstrated how these minority groups might be *in* the country, but they were not *of* the country. Much of this is a reality of patterns of racism and discrimination, which were observable, certainly in parts of the North of England when the likes of 'Paki bashing' at the hands of the Anti-Paki League (APL) was a ready occurrence. Racism was direct, ugly, and widespread. These Pakistani communities were concentrated, visible, and consequently vulnerable. But, in a response to these challenges, Pakistani communities mobilised cultural and social capital to activate various forms of support and resistance, in particular by way of helping newly

arrived migrants to find jobs, housing, as well as to settle into the local area easily. These various networks were viable largely due to various kin and ethnic clan-based associations based on the nature of the processes of migration in a historical sense. Anwar was able to show that these formations of social capital provided Pakistani communities with additional resources at times of acute stress that assisted the integration and participation dynamic concerning newly arriving co-nationals. In these local area settings where groups migrated to, there were local area considerations in the clustering of particular businesses that catered to the needs and wants of this particular Pakistani community, thereby strengthening existing norms and practices around group ethno-religio-cultural characteristics. While exploring these patterns of business activity, Anwar noted the importance of gender differences in that men held sway concerning crucial decisions and practices while women remained relatively in the background; although Pakistanis working in the rag trade took advantage of women of various ages who could be informally employed in the clothing manufacturing sector. Shops, travel agents, greengrocers, butchers, sweet stores, clothing stores, and a whole host of others were located in localised ethnic enclave economies, operating to meet the needs of the of a highly localised ethnic minority community that was shut out from the workings of society due to wider patterns of structural and cultural discrimination, thereby encouraged to strengthen the norms and values associated with the group, in this case, Pakistanis.

The noteworthy dimension above all of these local area considerations concerning the settlement of communities from rural areas in South Asia to urban spaces in Britain is that, at the time, many of these Pakistanis retained a certain myth of return. The idea behind this is that as migrant communities move from their countries of birth to a new country in search of opportunities and improved life chances, the relationship between the former country and the new country is maintained. For many, at the start of their new lives, there was a desire to return to the home country once their working lives in the new country were over. Over time, diasporic relations maintain continuity between the old home and the new home but also act as a way in which to transfer various forms of capital, including in the form of direct remittance payments to the sending country to support family members there. But it also allowed for the transfer of human capital and human resources, including in facilitating patterns of marriage migration, which had been a way in which to maintain family unity despite legislation attempting to limit the movement of people. However, these links 'back home', while offering opportunities for support at times of stress, could also lead to various restrictions placed on the freedoms and liberties of young people born and brought up in a different country to that of their parents. Writing in the late 1970s, Pakistani parents were beginning to identify aspects of integration into western culture as potential risks to their future lives – as they saw them at the time. Because their children were being born, raised, and taught in an education system that remained relatively unfamiliar to many, and given also the traditional and religious values associated with Pakistanis in general, for many parents, there

was a fear that a loss of religion and identity that might dissolve in the light of secular, individual existence. This idea of being caught 'between two cultures' and having to find a path through meant bridging different norms and values. However, this was entirely unrealistic for many from the areas of Punjab and Mirpur due to insufficient access to various capitals (economic, social, human, cultural, and political).

Anwar's study is essentially about the 'incapsulation' of Rochdale Pakistanis within their settings. It suggests a form of closing inwards based on the mobilisation of various capitals' support communities, especially in the early stages of settlement and adaptation, but also the closing off from external opportunities due to wider patterns of structural and cultural racism. The contribution of Anwar's work is in its ability to describe the micro-dynamic nature of social relations, helping to better understand the importance of ethnic, religious, and cultural values to determine aspects of the integration process. Alison Shaw's study of a Pakistani community in Oxford in the early 1980s was able to advance on some of these ideas by exploring how Pakistani communities reproduce their lives in the British context, including how certain types of housing were seen as preferable – as this allowed for the separation of genders but also how this housing mapped onto the lived experience of life before migration (Shaw, 1998). Anwar was able to demonstrate the importance of the social network analysis approach. His formative study was able to piece together a useful account of the lives of Pakistanis in a particular localised context, with the vast majority of the fieldwork for the study carried out during the mid-1970s. The subsequent issues that affected northern communities because of deindustrialisation, globalisation, and the internationalisation of capital and labour were largely felt during the area of Thatcherism that began from 1979 onwards. Huge swathes of local economies faced all sorts of challenges as local industries collapsed and unemployment began to rise rapidly. One effect of this was clearly upon Pakistani and other ethnic minority communities who invariably had to rely on existing resources for more than that which might have been offered by the state, and especially in a time where growing inequalities were leading to political polarisations. Later work carried out by Roger Ballard exploring the detailed nature of 'biraderism', defined as the nature of associational life between patrilineal clan-kinship networks, illustrated the importance of understanding cultural norms and values and their impact on issues of integration (Ballard, 1994). Studies exploring 'gift exchange' concerning British South Asian communities, including Pakistanis, carried out by Pnina Werbner, were able to demonstrate more succinctly the acute importance played by these forms of support when there are deaths, births, and marriages to consider (Werbner, 1990).

Anwar's other main contribution was to explore the dynamics of race and politics. Working in this area allowed Anwar to traverse into the fields of political sociology, rather than the social anthropology which had defined his work up to this point. He was following politics closely, right from the early 1970s when he was commenting on local elections and politics in Rochdale. He wrote numerous

articles for what became the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. His analysis of local voting patterns indicated the importance of the ethnic vote given local area concentrations. While South Asian groups in the 1970s were less likely to have voter registration comparable to majority groups, data suggested that turnout among them was always considerably higher. While immigration, race relations, and the political process as important considerations in the study of minorities, the genuine message in Anwar's work here is less to provide a comprehensive account of racial politics than to make a plea for increased participation and representation of minority groups in the political process. By taking advantage of various local area population concentrations, minorities can and will in the future (as he was writing in the early 1980s), change the landscape of political opportunity and action. This plea is an important aspect of Anwar's subjective, but also deeply proactive, commitment to integration through political participation and engagement. He understood the importance of taking part in society to activate the rights and responsibilities individuals have as citizens but also to make a difference in race relations.

Interest in the development of communities facing the pressures of migration and integration in a multicultural society led Anwar to pursue his long-standing passion of attempting to better understand political behaviour among African-Caribbean and South Asian groups in the main. With his interests in this field developing from the very first few years of his life in the north of England when Anwar was in support of the local community through his work as activist and friend, he continued to concentrate on how groups concentrated in particular localities could sway local, and potentially national, elections, in particular for the Labour Party. In subsequent critiques, it has been argued not just the Labour Party but all the major political parties have taken advantage of the *biraderi* system wherein patrilineal clan-kinship networks can be exploited for political gain (Layton-Henry, 1992). In hindsight, in the 1970s and 1980s, ethnic minorities were more readily identified with certain political parties. However, with the relative social mobility of some groups, political leanings have adapted according to opportunities, with more socially mobile South Asians tending to promote pro-business parties such as the Conservatives. The representation of women or individuals outside of the dominant clan-kin-based network has remained constrained due to cultural barriers. In certain settings, Anwar's identification of the role of clan kinship structures being able to mobilise certain Labour Party outcomes remains true in certain localised cases, as identified in recent research by Parveen Akhtar (2013).

## The legacy

Anwar was my doctoral supervisor at the University of Warwick from 1995 to 2000. As his research assistant, we worked together on numerous research projects

during this period, and beyond, including looking at race equality in the city of Birmingham and its position compared with other similar cities in Europe (Abbas and Anwar, 2005; Anwar et al., 2000). His work had a social anthropological, political science, and sociological perspective, which chimed well with my developing interests. I got to know all his other PhD students, and we all remain in close touch today. I once invited him and his two young daughters to my home for dinner to meet my family after a one-day international cricket match at Edgbaston between India and Pakistan in the early 2000s. Always dressed smartly, replete with a cup of tea close to hand, he addressed young and old, near and far with respect, integrity, and professionalism. It is no surprise that numerous tributes have been published by individuals who were his students as well as from organisations that worked with Anwar over the years, including the Muslim Council of Britain whom he advised regularly, who stated, 'He will be remembered with affection as a warm and helpful scholar, ready to offer his expertise and advice when called on by community organisations (Muslim Council of Britain, 2020).' While his work was not always admired by fellow academics, his dignity, integrity, and his emphasis on community identity and politics remained central to his intellectual project in Britain. Other scholars regarded his work as 'flat' or 'lacking theory', but this did not deter him and his cause.

Anwar was very much one of the early pioneers, not just in his migration to the country and through him setting himself up as an active citizen, but also as a scholar of race and ethnic studies, exploring specific issues affecting Pakistani communities, ultimately breaking out into working on electoral politics, intergenerational change, and the importance of understanding the lived realities of Muslims in Britain, foreshadowing many of the numerous complexities facing minority Muslim communities across Western European spaces in the current climate. He showed the importance of persistence and doggedness in social research, especially in race relations as there are often heightened tensions in the problematic under investigation, and that ultimately scholars serve the community, not themselves. He also emphasised the importance of neutrality because, while it is important to be moved by some of the tragedies of the reality of racial discrimination facing numerous groups and communities, and even when it reflects on the individual experience of researchers working within and without academia, they need to work with honesty and integrity but also to ensure that their work remains free from bias. When it comes to positions, neutrality and objectivity are the only viable positions. He also stated that, while there are numerous concerns around racism in society at every level, there is also a great deal of antiracism, at every level, but not all of it is entirely visible to the naked eye.

Emeritus Professor Muhammad Anwar OBE FRSA will be remembered fondly by all who knew and worked him. He is survived by his wife and two daughters. May his soul rest in peace. *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un* (Verily we belong to Allah, and truly to Him shall we return).

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iD

Tahir Abbas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0968-3261>

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