This paper will draw upon the post-1960s Muslim immigrant community of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and, in doing so, will provide a voice to those beyond the foci of Bradford, Birmingham and Leicester who, despite belonging to both a well-established and growing ethnic community, have remained relatively silent in the literature.  

It will assess the performance of these Muslim immigrants within the local employment sector and will contest claims of unemployment, low wages and a concentration in unskilled jobs. It will not just focus on the attainment of capital as the prime determinant of an individual’s economic success, but will also consider the opportunities immigrants were offered, the extent to which the second generation either adhered to or deviated away from the employment patterns of their parents, the distribution of Muslim immigrants amongst the varying economic sectors, and the level of entrepreneurship.

Britain has experienced massive immigration during the post-war era. Her role as the imperial hub for a quarter of the world’s surface has led to the creation of the socioeconomic and cultural entity of the Commonwealth. Depending on pre-existing links and bonds, Muslim immigrants arrived to Britain as ex-subjects of the imperial project. As Christian Joppke highlights, at the end of the Second World War, there were 800 million people living in countries that constituted 25% of the globe’s land surface who were


entitled to claim right of settlement in Britain. Zig Layton-Henry points out how, as subjects of the British Empire, these immigrants not only had the right to enter Britain, but also the right to British citizenship, they were entitled to vote, work in the civil service and serve in the British armed forces. Adrian Favell highlights that many of the early immigrants who arrived to Britain during the 1940s and 1950s had experienced the British education system, were familiar with British culture and, therefore, many regarded Britain as a natural second home. Despite immigration controls, the fear that often arrived with coloured Commonwealth immigrants, anti-immigrant politicians such as Thatcher, extremists such as Powell and the uncertainty concerning British citizenship, Muslim immigrants primarily from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have been settling in and establishing their own communities in Britain for the last fifty years. It has been Britain’s colonial history that gave way to an immigration pattern in which migrants arrived independently with social and economic aspirations.

Contrary to much of the literature, Newcastle’s immigrants appear to have rarely suffered disadvantages in the employment sector. During the 1960s, male Asian youths in Newcastle endured low unemployment levels and successfully attained apprenticeships, skilled and semi-skilled work, and competitive wages. Many worked in the transport sector alongside their indigenous counterparts. Also by the mid-1960s, a high proportion of Newcastle’s first-generation Asian immigrants were already self-employed, with many working as door-to-door salesmen or shopkeepers. This relatively successful economic position of Newcastle’s immigrants becomes apparent when comparing their situation to Indians and Pakistanis in Bradford, for example, many of whom worked as replacement

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labour in the textile industry, or to Birmingham’s West Indians, whom Lindsey argues were largely nothing more than marginal workers who completed “dirty” jobs.⁹

As stressed in numerous Newcastle City Council reports that emerged during the 1980s, it was the pursuit for self-employment that soon dominated the position of Newcastle’s Muslim immigrants within the local employment sector. The majority arrived with few economic resources and depended largely on contacts within their own communities. Indian and Pakistani immigrants tended to establish retail outlets. Some worked in the drapery trade and, initially, contacts would be used to sell draperies door-to-door and, once enough money had been saved, the salesmen would open market stalls and, eventually, small shops. The Bangladeshis often sought employment in local restaurants. They started out as kitchen staff until their ability in the English language was fluent enough to be promoted to floor staff. Many of these workers accumulated enough capital and experience to one day run a small take-away of their own and, if this was successful, possibly even a restaurant.¹⁰

These reports did not mention apprenticeships or second-generation South Asian immigrants deviating away from the employment patterns of their parents. Instead, the exact opposite seemed to be occurring in that the choices made by the second generation were simply adhering to those of the first in the form of small businesses. Firstly, this might have been due to the North East of England’s economic structural change of the 1970s and 1980s. With the closure of the dockyards, the steelworks and the coal mines, many skilled and unskilled manual workers found themselves out of work, potentially causing many second-generation Asians to revert back to the employment patterns of their parents. Secondly, the literature suggests that Muslim immigrants might have chosen to establish, run or work in small ethnic minority businesses due to racial prejudice, and in

order to avoid unemployment. A third possible reason for why Newcastle’s Muslim immigrants had, by the early 1980s, opted for self-employment might have been the nature of the immigrants themselves, with many studies stressing the link between ethnic minorities and entrepreneurship both within and beyond Britain and the rest of Europe, whether it be Chinese immigrants in Italy or Taiwanese immigrants in Canada.

Despite this ambition to be self-employed, few Muslim immigrants in Newcastle had any previous experience in business. Business ventures were mostly undertaken solely on the basis of personal judgement, rather than on planned projections of likely income and a thorough investigation of financial and other assistance available. Newcastle’s Muslim immigrant businessmen have never needed to adhere to the business etiquette consisting of projections of planned income or assistance from a business development agency because they have historically sought advice from within their own communities and have used past successful business experiences as models.

Needless to say, this approach had disadvantages. A saturation point could be reached when it was no longer financially viable to open another take-away or corner shop in a given area, or the investment of resources may not always be used to the optimum efficiency. However, this trait of not seeking assistance from outside the immigrant community is by no means particular to Newcastle. Giles Barrett, Trevor Jones, David McEvoy and Chris McGoldrick’s 2002 study stressed the overwhelming tendency for British immigrants to rely on funds from within their ethnic communities. It cannot be

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14 Ibid., p. 23.

said, however, that there was not assistance available to Newcastle’s Muslim immigrant businessmen as the city hosted numerous small firm advisory services. However, very few ethnic minority members approached these services seeking advice. Various attempts were made by Newcastle’s local authority to assist immigrants with the foundation of small businesses. There were seminars and courses in which the financial and other types of aid available to them were discussed. On the whole, however, these were poorly attended.\textsuperscript{16}

In 1997, Newcastle City Council compiled a survey that was to be completed by the owners of Newcastle’s ethnic minority businesses. The survey was sent to 465 businesses and was completed by 96% of them. Some of the results are as follows: 85% of the businesses had not had any form of business training, only 35% expressed an interest in taking part in a business support network, 62% operated as sole traders, 18% were dissatisfied with their locations, 22% were affected by crime and 17% by racial harassment.\textsuperscript{17} What immediately becomes apparent is that, although the majority of businesses had not received any type of business training, only about a third of them were interested in joining a support network. Their desire for independence is further enhanced by the fact that, in most cases, assistance is rejected, despite racial harassment and crime not being uncommon.

As well as succeeding in attaining the long sought-after goal of economic independence, Newcastle’s Muslim immigrant population has benefited from an Anglo-Asian cultural osmosis where influences have been mixed to create an Asian-inspired and English-influenced saleable product. An example of this Anglo-Asian cultural osmosis is the Birmingham-created Balti “curry”, a dish served in Indian and Pakistani restaurants that has been invented purely for the British customer. The success of this dish across Britain becomes especially apparent when compared to that of other European Muslim immigrant communities. The \textit{döner kebab}, for example, a food that has been referred to as a “made in Germany ““Turkish speciality””,\textsuperscript{18} has arguably been the “creation” of an immigrant community in comparably far less favourable circumstances, with the literature suggesting

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11-31.}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Black Business Development Project, 1981, MD.NC/162/1, p. 24.
\item \textsuperscript{17} See Minority Ethnic Businesses in Newcastle. Report of Survey Undertaken by Chief Executive’s Department Newcastle City Council 1997, MD.NC/614/2, Tyne & Wear Archives Service.
\end{itemize}
that many kebab stands might have initially sprung up around the Kreuzberg district of Berlin during the early to mid-1970s merely because of job losses following the oil crisis. It has been argued that partaking in such business ventures was no more than the more welcome alternative to returning to Turkey and that many Turkish immigrants have since been forced to diversify into other sectors, believing that a German host society’s cultural repulsion of Turkish foodstuffs is becoming increasingly widespread. In Newcastle, however, as throughout Britain, whether opening a small corner-shop or an Indian takeaway, the Muslim immigrant businessman has created a saleable product from a merger of indigenous and ethnic cultures and influences within the existing framework of small British retail. Cultural assimilation has enabled Muslim immigrants to create and thrive in their own economic niche.

If it is assumed that economic integration takes place only when ethnic workers are dispersed throughout the employment sector, vertically and horizontally, one would have to conclude that the preponderance of ethnic minority businesses in Newcastle has historically signified a lack of economic integration. Newcastle’s Muslim immigrants are not distributed throughout the local economy or its various facets. Instead, although there is a scattering of these businesses throughout Newcastle’s central business district, the main concentration is located in the city’s West End. However, this uneven distribution to the West End might not be so much due to a lack of economic integration or merely the result of this quarter housing a large percentage of the city’s immigrants, but possibly also a reaction to market forces. It is the West End with its burgeoning student and white working class population that often forms the foundation for Indian take-aways and Pakistani corner-shops. This demonstrates an entrepreneurial spirit amongst ethnic minorities, which has often been misunderstood amongst social scientists. It has frequently been the subtle entities of family and friendship ties embodied by a moral-cultural economy of obligation amongst immigrants, rather than the initiatives of the council and local opportunities, which have defined the world of the ethnic minority businessman.

There is no doubt that a certain level of economic integration is attainable. At some stage, Newcastle witnessed Muslim immigrants working alongside members of the

indigenous population either as bus drivers or conductors. However, it appears that perhaps not economic integration, but rather economic independence, has been their long-term goal. Rather than arguing that their behaviour towards the labour market has been dictated by constraint, Newcastle’s Muslim immigrants have prevailed both in competing with members of the indigenous population and, more importantly, in manipulating the employment sector to suit their long-term needs. What has emerged is a Muslim immigrant community that has succeeded in achieving a long sought-after economic independence in the form of small businesses as a result of a cultural, social and economic interaction with the local indigenous population. Like those in London, Birmingham, Bradford and Leicester, Newcastle’s Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants have traditionally chosen self-employment when possible and have relied, in most cases, solely on members of their own communities in doing so. Daily life appears to have continued within Newcastle’s Muslim immigrant community almost in willing ignorance of the policy debates and fraught deliberations of Westminster. It appears as though acceptance, ambition and assimilation have defined the world of Newcastle’s Muslim immigrant businessman.

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