

Balti Britain – A Journey Through the British Asian experience by Ziauddin Sardar.
Granta 2008.

Ziauddin Sardar is a writer for whom I have enormous respect, inspired by my reading of his previous book, *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, and nurtured by his many articles for the *New Statesman*.

Balti Britain is a mixture of autobiography, history, sociology and politics, as Sardar traces his own roots as well as the history of Asian settlement in Britain. Starting with his unhappy immigrant experience in the East End of London, Sardar sets as a central theme to the book the history of the relationship between Britain and the Asian sub-continent, demonstrating incontrovertibly clearly the longevity and closeness of the relationship as well as the depth of mutual influence. His conclusion is that Asians can hardly be called 'immigrants' to Britain in the conventional sense of the word, and it is a view with which all fair-minded readers should find themselves in agreement.

As the title suggests, however, the other strong element in the book is food, indeed the second chapter is an excursus on Balti cuisine and its disputed origins, and the ways in which food plays a prominent part in family life especially at times of celebration: in this regard, but at many other points in the book also, Jewish readers will experience intense sensations of empathy.

Sardar also investigates the use of the word 'Asian', the way in which it has been used historically and in modern times, and argues that it is far too blanket a term which obscures real differences between the various peoples and nations that shelter under its umbrella.

For me the most powerful and touching parts of the book are those which deal with Sardar's family, most especially the chapter on his own arranged marriage; he writes movingly and honestly about his closest relatives, his parents, his wife and children, and his Nana in Pakistan, Hakim Sahib. It is here that Sardar is at his most personal and moving.

Devotees of Ziauddin Sardar will also know that he is fearless in tackling controversial issues, and this quality is especially to the fore in his chapters on the unrest among Muslim youth in northern England, and its radicalisation. His chapter 'Terrorists amongst us' not only considers the malign influences of sundry Muslim clerics but also the different schools of Islamic thought thriving today in Britain; his analysis of Islamist extremism is forthright, but he does not pull his punches with regard to the unwitting contribution that UK foreign policy has made to the unhappy situation in which we find ourselves, or to the way Islam is regularly misunderstood and misrepresented by and in the media.

Balti Britain is an outstanding and hopeful book by an outstanding and admirable man, a passionate and well-argued cry for more not less multi-culturalism, and a firm statement that the best is still to come for British citizens of Asian origin.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh