

## **Recreating Material Culture in Diaspora: The Private and Social Worlds of British-Pakistani Muslim Women<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*This article advances our understanding of material culture to include the everyday through an analysis of gendered cultural, religious and social practices as well as the physical spaces occupied by a diaspora community. The British-Pakistani Muslim women recreate their private and social worlds through remodelling their British (read alien) homes to accommodate their needs. They reclaim religious practices in mosques and celebrate weddings in ways that challenge patriarchal restrictions. They create special spaces through forming networks of help and advice. This allows them to not only preserve and promote their culture but also to negotiate oppressions. The result is the creation of private and social worlds that are unique to this diasporic community.*

**Keywords:** British-Pakistani, diaspora, Islamic heritage

### **1. Introduction**

Conventional understandings of material culture tend to focus on how objects are used to convey social messages, regulate relations and give symbolic meaning to human activity. Understanding material culture within diasporic communities provides a sense of how people within the community shape their lives to fit a broader structure. Most works on material culture tend to focus entirely on the tangible - objects, totems, buildings, architecture - but in studying a diasporic community, physical spaces and practices become the objects under study. Anna Pechurina's *Material Cultures, Migrations and Identities: What the Eye Cannot See*

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<sup>1</sup> The data for this paper was generated using ethnographic methods during an 18-month long study conducted in Slough. Slough is a town in the south east of England known for its ethnically diverse population with a substantial British-Pakistani presence. The names of all respondents and some landmarks sites have been changed to ensure anonymity.

(2015) is a relevant starting point to address how migrant communities construct their physical worlds. Expanding on Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined community", she suggests that migrants construct their identities and relate to their home country through everyday cultural practices which include home decor and fashion. Practices and physical spaces are the units I address in this article, in order to understand how the women in a community reshapes their material world in the face of multiple structures of patriarchy.

## **2. Re-creating Private and Social Spaces through Material and Cultural Practices**

A large majority of Pakistani families in Slough have rural origins. Migration to a foreign land is doubled with settlement in an urban environment. For the first-generation Pakistani women this called for adjustments at many fronts. Though chain migration and the trend of marriages within relatives meant that they were not alone in the new country, one of the effects of migration was to limit spaces where women got together. In Slough the British-Pakistani women are actively recreating those spaces outside their homes as well as within through re-modelling of their English homes, participating in religious and other social gatherings, and accessing social networks of help and advice.

### *2.1. Remodelling of English Homes*

Woodward (2007) explains the centrality of home to people's lives but also its ability to transcend the private domain and become part of public domain. Remodelling of British home to accommodate Pakistani cultural values is then an exercise in creation of a specific material culture through cultural inscription of a physical space.

Extensions were very popular with British-Pakistanis in Slough. Before they buy a house, they always assess its prospects – whether a bedroom can be added to it, does it have enough space to build another toilet, if the kitchen can be enlarged to include a diner, and most importantly is there a possibility of a conservatory being constructed? All these options were crucial to house-buying choices. The local councillors were constantly approached for help and advice on how to obtain planning permission for extensions. This topped the list of demands community

members put on them. Even non-Pakistani councillors<sup>2</sup> were attuned to this need of the Pakistanis. Most of the Pakistanis had had their kitchens enlarged. Some had constructed conservatories that were larger than their front rooms. Where people could not construct conservatories they had made entire rooms in their back gardens in places where there would have been a garden shed in a typical English home. Some people had had the walls between rooms on the ground floor knocked out to create larger sitting rooms. Women, I found out, were major players in such decisions; wanting to mould their English houses to their Pakistani lifestyles.

Sons continued to live with their parents for the first few years of their marriage until they could buy their own house and move out. In case of a daughter if she married a British-born it was easy, she would move with her in-laws. But if the spouse came from Pakistan, he had to be housed as a *ghar-damad*<sup>3</sup> (house son-in-law) until the time he established himself and he and his wife could afford a home of their own. Children rarely move out into rented accommodations. They only moved out when they could buy their own house.

Most of the older women, whose children had moved out still looked after their grandchildren as their daughters or daughters-in-law worked. For some the nature of kinship obligations meant a constant load of visitors and they needed the extra space. Mrs *Abrar Chaudry* had two rooms on the ground floor with a small kitchen. On the top floor she had three small rooms and a bath. Although she did not have any children of her own, her husband had two grown kids from a previous marriage who sometimes visited them. In addition, her elderly father in law lived with her. Their house was always full of guests. With the front room occupied by her father-in-law, the guests were received in the other room on the ground floor that they called their sitting room. Sometimes there would be five to six men sitting in this room, leaving no choice for her but to be cooped up in the kitchen. Although she did not cover up and easily chatted with the men visiting her husband, the norms of *purdah* demanded that she did not sit in these gatherings of unaccompanied men. She would stand in

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<sup>2</sup> One of the councillors was of Caribbean ethnic origin

<sup>3</sup> *Ghar* means home and *damad* means son-in-law. The term has derogatory connotations as no honourable son-in-law would live in the house of his in-laws and be dependent on them. It is considered a blow to the male ego to be termed as a *ghar-damad*. Katharine Charsley (2005); Malik (2016) discusses some of the social, cultural, and economic difficulties faced by these migrant husbands

the small kitchen for hours on end serving these endless gathering with tea, *samosas*, *kebabs* and even dinner depending on the time of the day. If these men would come with their wives, the women would sit in the upstairs bedroom and she would have to run upstairs and downstairs serving her guests. Her predicament was a constant source of squabbling with her husband. She convinced her husband to build a conservatory in front of this room with a door opening out on the side of the house. They finally had a conservatory built that was larger than their sitting room. The conservatory turned into a proper *mardan khana* (mens' quarters) where unaccompanied men were received and Mrs Chaudry had the inner sitting room all to herself as her *zenaan khana* (women's quarters). She was very proud of her conservatory and claimed that the whole of Slough turned up to see how it had been built - many wishing to replicate her design.

Sometimes women cleverly had these extensions done in a way to get their dominating husbands out of the way. They felt that in these small English houses, the husbands were always prying into their affairs, challenging their control and keeping an eye on their social circle.

'These English homes are so cramped you can never have any privacy when your *sahailian* visit,' declared *Sughra*. Instead of having a conservatory made, she opted for a separate room at the end of the garden. She had come round many times to inspect Mrs *Chaudry's* conservatory with her husband. She was trying to convince him to have one built in their house too. After the husband agreed to a conservatory, allocated the budget and hired the same builder as Mrs *Chaudry*, the finer details were left to *Sughra*. I was surprised to find a separate room at the end of garden instead of a conservatory when I visited to interview her and enquired how her reluctant husband had agreed to this major change. She owed it to a little *chalaaki* (cleverness) on her part. She had managed to convince her husband that Mrs *Chaudry's* type of conservatory was structurally not possible in their home. Her husband was away at work in the mornings when the builder came to make estimate. She managed to solicit the help of the builder to convince her husband with technical jargon as she feared that her pleas alone may not be sufficient. The builder Mr. *Kamran* had worked in Slough for the last sixteen years. He worked *desi* (ethnic; traditional) style. Used to this type of manoeuvring he was happy to go along. He spent hours in these homes and was well served with tea and food by the housewives, developing brotherly relations to most of these women who called him *Kamran Bhai* (*Kamran* brother). According to him

it didn't hurt his business and most women were happy. This way he got more work as well. It was a win win situation for all. *Sughra's* husband was happy that he had a place where he peacefully studied in the afternoons, watched television or entertained his friends. *Sughra* was happy that she had control over the living room where her friends could come and go and they could discuss whatever they liked.

## *2.2 Religious Gatherings and Weddings*

Decorating houses with particular objects, displaying of calligraphy, taking out public processions, constructing mosques and performing certain rituals allow Muslims in diaspora to construct a specifically 'Muslim' space (Metcalf, 1996). Familiar shapes and practices are an effort to personalize the foreign, in the process creating and re-creating material culture. Mosque is the most visual expression of Muslim diaspora identity (Farrag, 2017) but what is more central is its role in the creation of material culture through human interactions. These human-object relations expand our understanding of material culture to accommodate human agency along with material objects (Khan, 2017).

There are a total of four mosques in Slough. The first one of these called the Montem Lane mosque is the oldest and was established in a terraced house in 1969. The second one, *Jamia Masjid Ghausia*, locally known as the Diamond Road Mosque, is the first purpose built mosque in Slough. Both Montem Lane and Diamond Road Mosques are run by the same administration and are of *Barelwi*<sup>4</sup> orientation. The third major mosque is the *Jamia Masjid Islamic Centre* or the Stoke Poges Lane Mosque. The fourth mosque is the Ragstone Road Mosque or *Jamia Masjid Hazrat Sultan Bahu*, again of *Barelwi* orientation. There is a general perception that the *Jamia Masjid Islamic Centre* (Stoke Poges Mosque) is of *wahabi*<sup>5</sup> orientation. Although the trustees of the mosque

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<sup>4</sup> Pakistani Muslims in Britain largely follow the *Barelwi* tradition within *sunni* Islam. The 19<sup>th</sup> century *Barelwi* school was greatly influenced by the writings of Ahmad Raza Khan who belonged to *Bareilly* in India and hence the name of the tradition. It is tolerant of practices of praying at shrines and the love of the prophet expressed by celebrating his birth and singing *naat* (poetry recitation in the praise of Prophet Muhammad) and *qawwali* (sufi devotional songs). Since Punjabis in Pakistan are mostly *Barelwi*, it has a strong presence amongst British Muslims. Also See Metcalf 2003.

<sup>5</sup> *Wahabi* school of thought traces its origin to its founding father, religious revivalist

categorically refuted this when interviewed, most older Pakistanis called it as such. The deputy Mayor in his interview alluded that they had received funding from rich Saudi donors who even gave the trustees of the mosque a Rado<sup>6</sup> watch each on its inauguration. In addition to the homes of Pakistanis, mosques were also among the sites of analysis during the study. I regularly performed my *namaz-e-jumma* (Friday prayers) in the two big mosques on Stoke Poges Lane and the Diamond Road with a considerable number of women attending. During my stay two religious festivals were celebrated which involved gatherings of women attended by over five hundred women. These were the *Eid Milaad-un-Nabi* (festival celebrating the birth of Prophet Mohammad) and the spiritual gathering conducted on the 11<sup>th</sup> of the Islamic month *Rabi-us-Saanni*, *Ghiyirvin Sharif*, in the honour of a saint Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani commemorating his *urs* (the day he passed away)<sup>7</sup>.

The first time I visited Diamond Road Mosque was to attend a gathering of women celebrating *Ghiyirvin Sharif*. It was a Sunday afternoon. The hall at Diamond Road Mosque was bustling with over five-hundred women and children. There was a general mood of festivity about the gathering. Most women were dressed up as if for a wedding party: women in bright coloured *shalwar kameez*, in *hijabs* and flowing *duppattas*<sup>8</sup>. Despite the commotion that comes with having over five-hundred women in one place and in a festive mood, it was a very organised affair. There was an organising committee of women who could be easily seen owing to the bright yellow sashes worn across their shoulders.

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Mohammed bin Abdul Wahab. This tradition has been the bedrock of Saudi Arabian practice of Islam since the pact between the founder of the Saud family, Mohammed Ibne Saud with Addul Wahab about two hundred and fifty years ago (Masoud 1999). *Wahabism*, a radical Unitarian doctrine, has gained influence all over the Muslim world due to the backing of the oil rich Saudis. *Wahabis* are categorically against introducing innovations in Islam and consider Muslims who visit graves as *kafirs* (non-believers).

<sup>6</sup> A Rado watch is a symbol of opulent wealth in rural Pakistani culture. Gulf migrant workers would bring back a Rado watch for a family member in the 1980s and that would be showed off to the entire village, hence the Rado/Saudi connection.

<sup>7</sup> *Ghiyarvin Sharif* is a spiritual gathering conducted on the 11<sup>th</sup> of every Islamic month commemorating the day of his passing away. *Ghiyarvin* means eleventh in the Urdu language.

<sup>8</sup> *Dupatta* is not the same as a headscarf as it may or may not be used to cover the head. It is a rectangular piece of cloth usually one metre wide and two and a half metres to three metres long.

They were helping women get seated as well as asking them to stay quiet from time to time; there was another lady conducting the whole programme making announcements on a dais with the PA system. And there was a team of female *naat khawaan* (singers of *naat*) who sang *naat*, *hamd*<sup>9</sup> and devotional songs in the honour of the saint in Urdu as well as Punjabi.

Everyone sat on the floor which had been covered with white sheets and a table and chair had been placed at the centre of the gathering. There was no one seated there at the beginning of the programme - it was reserved for *Bibi Jaan*, who I found out was the guest of honour, and was supposed to make a speech. I enquired about *Bibi Jan* from the woman seated next to me and was told that *Bibi Jan* was a religious woman who could trace her lineage to *Silsila-e-Qadria*<sup>10</sup>. Her father had come to England in the 1960s and had settled down in Blackburn. He made a name for himself when he bravely stood up to a group of skinheads and was much admired and respected for that. She gave spiritual guidance to women just as her ancestors had done back in Pakistan.

During the gathering, women chatted with each other non-stop and had to be hushed by the organisers again and again. Some even preferred to sit as far away from the centre as possible, near the entrance/exit which made chatting easier. They would only go silent at the end of each *naat* when all joined in the singing of *durood*<sup>11</sup>.

The announcement of *Bibi Jaan's* arrival caused a bit of a stir. Announcements were being made again and again on the loudspeaker not to approach *Bibi Jan* and try to hug her. However, keeping in view how much women revered *Bibi Jan*, permission to kiss her hand was granted. As *Bibi Jan* came in, women sang *durood* fervently. *Bibi Jan* sat down on the podium. A *naat* was sung by a young girl in a very melodious voice. At the end of it, *Bibi Jan* made a speech which highlighted the importance of such religious festivals. She warned her audience against the propaganda of certain Muslims who downplayed the importance of *auliyaah* (saints). She also mentioned women approaching her repeatedly with the complaint of having no *sukoon* (peace) in their lives. She roared:

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<sup>9</sup> A *hamd* is a poem or song in praise of Allah.

<sup>10</sup> *Sufi* chain leading to *Sheik Abdul Qadir Jilani*.

<sup>11</sup> Invoking blessing on Prophet Muhammad

*'I ask you why is there no sukoon in your lives? You are standing at the tills of Tescos, driving around in cars, then why is it that you are besukoon?'*<sup>12</sup>

Coming up with the answer herself, she asked women to do some soul searching and realise that running after material gains in Britain had taken them farther away from their religion and traditional values.

*BibiJan's* speech was interspersed with women chanting slogans. One woman would take the lead and the others would chant back:

*Narai Takbeer, Allah-o-Akbar! (The slogan of Allah's greatness, Allah is Great)*

*Naraee Risaalat, Yaa Rasul Allah! (The Slogan of Prophethood, O Prophet of Allah)*

*Nara-e- Haideri, Yaa Ali! (The slogan of Haider, O Ali)*

At the end of the speech, there was a *dua* (calling out to Allah; supplication) after which food was served. Women mingled with each other and sat around the place for a long time. The entire event stretched over a good four hours or so.

This was not the only gathering of women that I attended during my fieldwork in Slough. I was part of other *Khatam-e-Quran* gatherings which were a regular feature. Fifteen or twenty women would get together in a house to read Quranic text. There would be recitation of *naats* after the Quranic reading and then a joint *dua* would be held. Food would be served at the end and women would lounge around chatting with their tea and *samosas*<sup>13</sup>. This was the part most women were interested in as these occasions were treated as get-togethers.

Most men I met were very disapproving of such gatherings. They openly complained against their wives who left homes for hours neglecting housework. They, however, found restraining their wives difficult as it was done in the name of religion. *Baji Kishwar* confided how her husband complained each time she went. She warned him against Allah's wrath on such occasions and that according to her would, '*shut him up.*' She was very proud of being a part of the organising committee

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<sup>12</sup> Invoking blessing on Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>13</sup> *Samosa* is a stuffed pastry with a variety of spicy fillings.



as it gave her something to important to do and allowed her time with her friends simultaneously.

Although such gatherings were quite common in Slough, and heavily attended, some young women I interviewed did say that they did not attend most of them. *Shehla* was one such young respondent. *Shehla's* mother was an active participant of such *Durse* and *Khatam-e-Quran* gatherings. Though I had seen *Shehla* on the *Eid Milaad-un-Nabi* celebration in the Diamond Road Mosque, she owned to attending it only because everyone in her family was going. According to her most of the women in such gatherings were either first-generation British-Pakistanis or spouses who had only recently come to this country. For women who were born and raised in Pakistan and then brought over to England as spouses, such gatherings were important as they allowed them to be part of social networks they lacked here.

When asked if there were any alternative religious groups of younger British-born women in Slough that she could go to, *Shehla* mentioned *Al-Nisa* but mused that most Pakistani women avoided it. *Al-Nisa* met in the Stoke Poges mosque – a mosque that was labelled as *wahabi* by many Pakistanis in Slough owing to the fact that it had been funded by some Saudis. *Al-Nisa* was not popular among the British-Pakistani women in Slough because they felt that you had to be the '*hijab* and *abayah*<sup>14</sup>' type to be part of it. Although *Shehla* considered herself to be religious, her conception of religiousness did not match with those at *Al-Nisa*. She felt that one had to be very devout to be included in that group. She was the only one of my respondents who actually mentioned *Al-Nisa*; none of the others even knew that it even existed. Whereas hundreds<sup>15</sup> of women turned up for the festive occasions in Diamond road mosque, only a handful were members of *Al-Nisa*. The religiousness expressed by *Bibi Jan* and displayed at the *khatam-e-Quran mehfil*

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<sup>14</sup> Long black cloak worn on top of garments.

<sup>15</sup> While I was writing the thesis, I found out that the number of women attending *Khatam-Quran mehfil* organised by British-Pakistani women in Slough increased to an extent that the hall in the Diamond Road mosque was insufficient to accommodate them. To celebrate *EidMilad-un-Nabi* in March 2009, the women gathered money and paid around £3000 to rent a private hall. Reportedly 1500 women attended. This time the popularity of the event had spread beyond their town and its neighbouring places. *Baji Tazeem* reported that three coaches full of women came from Manchester and one from Birmingham only to attend.

allowed women to create social spaces outside their homes that gave them a chance to express themselves and therefore were more popular.

Religious gatherings were not the only occasions that provided women with a chance to get together in Slough. Pakistani weddings in Britain are becoming as elaborate affairs as they were back home. A typical Pakistani wedding has three main functions – *mehndi*<sup>16</sup>, *baraat* and *waleema*. But women start getting together for *dholki* sessions days before the main function days. *Wajeeha's* wedding was one such affair. She had come to Britain as a visitor. During her stay she was proposed to by a British-Pakistani. The proposal was accepted with the joint consultation of her maternal Uncle in Slough, her maternal Aunt in Bolton and her sister who also lived in Slough. It was decided that the wedding should take place here in Slough before *Wajeeha* leaves for Pakistan. Despite the fact that her immediate family was not here in the UK, her extended family got together to arrange a grand wedding befitting their *gujjar baraderi*.

Women gathered at *Wajeeha's* sister, *Tasneem's*, house after dinner each day two weeks before the wedding. Songs were sung on a *dholak*<sup>17</sup>. An all-women's affair, teenage girls, nieces, daughters of neighbours and friends practiced dance routines on popular Hindi songs. Menfolk sat in a separate room. Sometimes boys were allowed in to provide technical support such as help with the audio system. *Tasneem* and her daughters merrily served women with tea and sweet meats. On most days, as the evening would start to die and women and young girls would tire of singing and dancing they would form groups of two to three and engage in chit chat. Sometimes items of *Wajeeha's* trousseau would be brought out and elaborate discussions would follow like where to shop on the Oxford street for the perfect *lehnga*<sup>18</sup>, trips to South Hall, which beautician to be employed for her make-up etc. Serious subjects other than the forthcoming wedding would also be usually discussed especially by older women. Most of these women had had pretty long days and would have to get up early morning next day but they were not willing to let a chance of getting together go by.

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<sup>16</sup> *Mehndi* is henna ceremony, *baraat* is the main wedding day on which the *nikah* is performed and *waleema* is a reception given by the groom's family to mark the consummation of the marriage. Details follow in chapter 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Dohlki* or *dholak* is a small drum beaten with hands.

<sup>18</sup> It's a full-length skirt type of garment worn with a short shirt. A bridal *lehnga* is heavily embroidered.

### *2.3 Networks of Help and Advice - Dress makers and Beauticians*

In Slough many Asian-women had opened dress-making shops within their homes. Such places were frequented by women to socialize, discuss their problems and seek advice from other women. Mrs *Husnain* was one of the three such women I interviewed. She stitched *shalwar kameez* for £20 pounds a *jora* (a pair). Many women visited her house. She not only sat and chatted with them but also provided counselling. On one occasion, one of her customers complained about her husband sponsoring a family of relatives to come and visit. The wife suspected that they would not go back and would stay on as illegal immigrants. She was not as worried about the illegality of the issue as, of the fact that it would be an added burden on her in terms of house-work. She would have to feed these guests and wash for them. She complained that whenever any of her in-laws turned up they would not even move a dirty plate from the dinner table to the wash basin let alone help her wash it. She also complained that her husband was very stingy when it came to giving her any extra money but would spend lavishly on setting these relatives of his up in England. Mrs *Husnain* advised her to look into her husband's papers and get hold of the names and passport numbers of the prospective visitors to call the home office anonymously asking them to scrutinize the case more carefully. The visa applications of those relatives were turned down, though it is unknown if the call was ever made.

Local Asian beauticians were a source of such advice as well. *Anjum*, a 40-year old Pakistani-spouse who ran a successful beauty salon in her home, advised a customer to call 999 when she complained about her abusive husband. When the woman said it was impossible to call from home, she told her to inform her GP about it. *Anjum* seemed to be advising women on all issues, from securing council housing to immigration problems. She would also pass on phone numbers of 'women-friendly' and helpful councillors and other resourceful persons from the Asian community.

She also seemed to be a valuable source of advice on another important issue – how to pass your driving test. Learning how to drive and then successfully securing the full driver's license was very important for women in Slough. For spouses from Pakistan, getting the license was deemed as important as getting a British citizenship. Women felt that learning to drive was their first step towards independence and freedom. They encouraged other women to learn how to drive and passed on useful tips such as easy tactics to get permission from the men of the house,

which driving school to go to, when and where to book a test, and even common errors that led to a failure in the test. *Anjum* had the number of a Pakistani female driving instructor in case you were from a conservative family, instructors who charged less and were flexible on lesson timings, instructors who had a 100% success rate of passed in first attempt students etc. I too, thanks to the assistance of my Pakistani respondents, passed my driving test for a full driver's license in Slough. The number of people who turned up to congratulate me rivalled those who had turned up for the *mubarki*<sup>19</sup> (congratulatory visit) of my first born, bringing home to me the importance of this achievement for Pakistani women in Slough.

### 3. Conclusion

This article demonstrates how material and cultural practices among the Pakistan women of Slough, serve as more than just a means of preserving a sense of cultural identity. For these women, attending religious gatherings and weddings, subscribing to traditional dress codes, and remodelling English homes to suit the needs of a Pakistani family serve as a means to negotiate spaces that would otherwise not be available to them. The spatial reorganization of their realities along the lines of social networks enables Pakistani women to deal with everyday manifestations of systematic hurdles. What results is women constructing material and social worlds that are unique to their positions within a larger diaspora community.

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<sup>19</sup> The two most important kinship rituals considered obligatory within the Pakistani community were *afsos* (condolence) and *mubarki*(congratulations). In Slough, condolatory visits were paid to people who had lost a family member in Britain/Pakistan to even a cow or goat in their village in Pakistan. They were extended for all major to trivial mishaps. *Baji Tehreem's* brother in law (husband's brother) passed away during my fieldwork. The deceased was also the father-in-law of her son. Sixteen members of their extended family immediately left for Pakistan the very day news reached England. Those who were left behind maintained a *phoorri* (a condolatory vigil) in *Baji Tehreem's* house for a period of ten days. During this time, her daughters received guests who had come to offer their condolences. These visits were renewed on *Baji Tehreem* and her husband's return from Pakistan. Similar is the case for *mubarki*. People were gravely offended if their far and near kin did not turn up for such offerings. *Zeenat*, a British-born, had bought new sofas for her house. She complained several times against some of her friends and relatives who had forgotten to congratulate her on this new addition to her home in her interview as an indication of the increasing loss of values amongst some people here.

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