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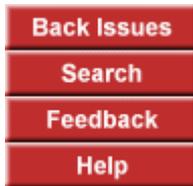
UK or US? Take your pick

By Ayesha Ijaz Khan



As the Pakistani diaspora expands and digs deeper roots for itself in its adopted homes, along comes a certain affinity for the country of residence

EVER had that debate in your house? I have, and it's not uncommon, I hear. As the Pakistani diaspora expands and digs deeper roots for itself in its adopted homes, along comes a certain affinity for the country of residence. Often, this affinity translates into justification of choice, with the "Pakistani-Americans" thinking they could not have done better for themselves, while the "Asian Britons" pride themselves on their sensibility in remaining closer to home. Of course, the folks in the Gulf feel they have it best but that's a discussion for another day. This comparison is limited strictly to the two largest homes of the Pakistani community outside of the Middle East. And I, having lived in both the U.S. and the U.K., feel singularly qualified to speak on the matter.



How does one even begin to compare the vastly expansive modernist U.S.A. with the culturally superior yet claustrophobic U.K.? Most discussions in Pakistani circles revolve, understandably, around those issues which affect an aspiring immigrant most. Thus the three main topics are: rights and ease of assimilation into the adopted country, cost of living, and finally, scientific/technological advancement that a third-world Pakistani would hope to benefit from as a first-world immigrant.

Let's begin with right of entry and assimilation as a foreigner. Assuming the person in question is a legal entrant, Britain, contrary to colonial mentality, can be quite welcoming. A work permit holder in Britain, for example, automatically becomes a permanent resident of the U.K. provided s/he has maintained a job with a respectable company for four years. At the end of the 48-month period, a simple stamp from the Home Office guarantees permanent residence and one year thereafter, one becomes eligible for the British passport.

Both the permanent residence stamp and acquisition of the passport are simple procedures and take no more than three weeks for approval. A good lawyer may even be able to reduce the time period to just a couple of days. Moreover, the spouse of a work permit holder has full rights to work anywhere in the private sector and in most areas of the public sector as well.

Contrast the U.S. An H-1 work permit holder is initially allowed a period of three years to work in the U.S. At the expiration of that time period, s/he can apply for a three-year extension. Although, in most cases, the extension is granted, it is a cumbersome process whereby the person has to leave the country for a stamp when it is approved. Approval too may take months, leaving the worker in travel limbo for a while.

At the end of the second three-year period, in exceptional cases, a seventh or eighth year extension is allowed. However, most workers try to push their employers for sponsorship before then so that they can obtain the all-time famous "green card", or, in other words, permanent residence. A green-card application can take up to two years, not to mention, several sleepless nights, to come through. Once a green card is obtained, another five years of residence in the U.S. are required before one is eligible for a passport. For that too, a nationality test is administered, and the immigrant is quizzed on pointless trivia such as who wrote the "Star Spangled Banner", the answer to which, probably most native Americans do not know. Lucky for the historically challenged, however, even low marks on the nationality test can result in acquisition of the blue passport.

As for the spouse of a U.S. work permit holder, an H-4 visa is issued, which means that the person is ineligible to work -how civilised is that? So all you career-oriented girls out there, waiting for an amreeka-return H-1 guy to fly you off to the land of opportunity, think again. You may actually have to kiss

your career good-bye, unless, in the off-chance you can get some company to sponsor you for your own H-1, the chances of which are generally dim, at least in a deflated economy.

It is true, nevertheless, that any baby born in the U.S. is automatically eligible for U.S. citizenship. Not so in Britain, where only children of permanent residents are eligible for U.K. nationality. In a less-publicized ruling, however, the U.S. has qualified that a U.S. citizen who has not spent any time in the U.S. after the age of fourteen, cannot pass on U.S. citizenship to his/her offspring. Such rulings may become more prevalent and further tightened in the post 9/11 U.S.A.

Even before 9/11 though, U.S. government authorities such as the INS loved to harass and intimidate. Their pejorative attitude towards foreigners frequently trickles down to other government watchdogs as well, namely airport staff and even local cops in most cases. A landing at any U.S. airport generally involves pestering interrogation of jet lagged passengers, followed by watchful glares of customs officials x-raying the luggage of non-U.S. Middle Eastern types.

Contrast Britain. A landing at the familiar Heathrow Airport entails relaxed questioning, often by fellow desi immigration officers in the comfortable background of Punjabi chatter. Customs is equally stress-free, as fresh homemade kebabs, authentic mangoes and pirated DVDs can easily come through. Try sneaking those goodies into Dulles or JFK, and you'd be lucky to escape Guantanamo Bay! So now that we've been through the scoop on rules and regulation, how about examining general treatment by the locals. By and large, the American people are quite friendly and supportive. Naturally, they prefer those who make an effort to eat apple pie and follow Monday night football, but who doesn't like a foreigner who appreciates local culture?

Britons, on the other hand, are, in London, at least, non-existent. It is not at all uncommon to have lived in London for four years but have zero British friends. In America, this would be un-heard of. The English mind their own business and generally prefer their country homes to the crowded, ethnically lush environs of central London.

But to the London-centric desi, it's St. John's Wood, Knightsbridge, or Mayfair. I mean if you're not going to be in close proximity to Oxford Street and Edgware Road, what's the point? Besides, London and England in general have no American-style suburbia to speak of. Uniform and anglicised as they may be, American suburbs do have an air of comfort about them. British homes, by contrast, are built around a series of stairs leading in and out of miniscule rooms that exude nothing but depression.

Central London, moreover, is a financially prohibitive prospect. Six hundred pounds a week (which, mind you, is only considered a mediocre rent) gets

you barely a thousand square foot. Jeez, that's fifty thousand dollars a year! Two years of that rent would mean a fully paid up four bedroom house, possibly with a pool in one of Houston's respectable suburbs. But could one really deal with hillbilly George Bush country? In New York of course the rents rival London but all other expendables, i.e., food, clothing, etc. are about 1.5 times cheaper. So, undoubtedly, when it comes to cost of living, the U.S. lives up to its "land of the plenty" reputation.

Finally, what about benefiting from the conveniences and scientific advancement of the First World? British engineering is clearly a sell-out. It takes, on average, a year to fix a tube escalator gone awry. No jokes. Ever have a plumbing or heating problem in Britain? It could take several visits, not to mention, leaks before anything is sorted. Then too, it's rarely a permanent fix. Not so in the U.S., where one call normally does it. Besides, since most of the construction is newer, such problems are far less frequent in America. Eventually, one can perhaps grow accustomed to the lack of on-the-spot fixes in Britain. But what is most troubling for British residents is the below-par healthcare system.

It is no secret that the National Health Service (popularly known as NHS) is in shambles. With the government making desperate efforts to recruit nurses and doctors from South Africa and other Commonwealth nations, the waits for basic health services are atrocious. A junior doctor in Britain works longer hours and makes less money than a tube operator. No wonder there is a severe shortage of competent physicians. The worst part is that going private is only half an option. Many emergency services are only part of the NHS. Thus, a couple who pays top dollars, or should I say, pounds, to go for private natal care may end up at a scummy NHS hospital if an emergency occurs at delivery time, as most private hospitals do not cater for emergency health care.

In a recent World Health Organization report, Britain fared an appalling number eighteen in health care. Of course the U.S. topped the list at number one. But get this; Cuba wasn't far behind, at number two. Has old Castro been bribing the WHO or does he really have it figured out better than Blair? Justifiably, not just the U.S., but other First World countries such as France, Italy, Spain and Germany all figured in the top ten. But even more disconcerting for British residents is the fact that countries such as Cuba, Oman and Saudi Arabia left Britain lagging behind.

So there you have it—a brief overview of the pros and cons in the lengthy Britain versus America debate. It is hard to say which is conclusively better. But perhaps two conclusions that can be drawn are that America, in spite of its melting pot rhetoric, has adopted a pretty cumbersome immigration process and Britain, despite its earlier imperial successes, leaves a lot to be desired in terms of scientific advancement.

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