In the previous chapters, I have traced the problem of runaway Asian girls in Glasgow, and presented the finding through statistical information and case studies. I have also outlined the socio-legal implications and discussed various issues and themes related to the problem. The aim of this chapter is to place the findings in a broader context. Even at the risk of simplifying matters, an attempt is made, in the first section, to outline some common features that can be attributed to the profile of a runaway girl from an Asian background. This section also discusses some issues and tendencies, namely, that of community leaders, multiculturalism, and the question of diaspora with its implications for understanding structure and institutions in the homeland. The second section sketches the limits of the study, and the third section suggests some themes for further research in this area of study.

1. Some Issues and Tendencies

Profile of a Runaway Asian Girl

It appears that girls who leave home happen to belong to families which are structurally nuclear, but are numerically large. Girls whose parents have either received no formal education, or who have had a little education in the
subcontinent, seem to leave home more frequently than those whose parents are educated. The economic condition of the family also had its influence on the phenomenon with most runaway girls coming from families which belonged to a low or middle income group, where the heads of the families were shop owners or retailers.

Girls born and brought up in Britain, who form the second or the third generation of the community living in the UK, are also more likely to leave home. Also the incidence of running away from home is higher among girls who are not the first born or the eldest in the families. Strict and orthodox upbringing was another common feature of Asian runaway girls.

These features suggest that parental and family background solely determine the decision of runaway girls to leave home. This suggestion is further reinforced when the reasons for leaving home are taken into account, the most predominant among these being oppression, breakdown in communication, and a lack of independence.

But realistically speaking, the genesis of a social problem is often rooted in the society itself, and cannot assign the entire cause of runaway girls on parents and families would be erroneous.

The stress and strain of living in a western set-up where traditional roles and institutions are constantly challenged, with the pressures of adapting to a cultural or "racial" minority status and the discrimination that goes with it, are some of the other factors that have a bearing on this issue. So, clashes between parents and children result from conflicting worldviews where the former expect conformation to the ideology of filial duty and family respect, while the latter who have had a taste of the western culture question long held beliefs and yearn for a change in attitudes. All this leads to a breakdown in communication between the two. Any attempt on the part of the parents to establish their authority may be construed as
oppression. So, seemingly it is oppression and breakdown in communication which might lead a girl to leave home, but actually the reason might be far more complex.

The harsh reality of an ethnic minority existence is such that at one level, running away from home could also be seen as a reaction against racism. Besides the oppression and lack of independence, running away is also a means of getting away from a background that is held responsible for all the racism one is subjected to. By leaving home one is breaking the link that binds the individual to the culture, tradition and community which has been the target of discrimination and has been nothing but a source of embarrassment and humiliation.

However this perception often changes once the runaway girls distance themselves from their families. They re-establish communication with the realisation that they cannot deny their roots and that their Asianness is there to stay. Being critical of certain aspects of their culture and protesting against some customs and beliefs is one thing and forsaking it all together is another. They finally become aware of the fact that it is this very culture and community that cushions them against the hostile elements of the host society to which they can never completely belong.

*Community Leaders as Brokers*

To begin with, it seems that the leaders of the Asian community, sometimes referred to as brokers, have failed the Asian youth in getting them their due in the British society. Many of them are a part of the “race relations industry” and have actively pursued and lobbied with the local white administrators in order to represent their communities on the local Community Relation Councils (CRCs). There have been instances when individuals have used systems of patronage and nepotism, and have manipulated social networks, in order to promote their own chances of becoming a CRC representative.
In the 1980s, when local government initiatives started extending public resources to a range of ethnic minority communities, there grew an even fiercer struggle for community leadership. This was mainly because besides being able to influence the local government decision-makers, there was also the possibility of controlling “community funding.” Hence individuals and groups which did not always have the confidence of the community, emerged as the leaders. Instead of addressing key issues, like sources and manifestations of basic social and economic inequality affecting the minorities, their energies would be spent in the ongoing internal struggles for power within the community.

The Asian youth, particularly the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis, are completely disillusioned with their elders. Dogged as they are with increasing unemployment and restricted employment opportunities, a volatile gang mentality has arisen among the young Asians. Glasgow, too, has seen the rise of Asian gangs and an increase in criminality among a small group of Asian youth, especially in the south side of the city, a deprived area.

Policy of Multiculturalism

The policy of multiculturalism, which many felt was an answer to discrimination and inequality faced by the minorities, has failed to deliver. Rather than creating a space within which communities could grow at their own pace and interact with the dominant culture, these policies have further isolated the members of the minority communities. Policies based on notions of multiculturalism are flawed mainly on two accounts. First, it is assumed that culturally different communities are characterised by unique cultural traits which remain unchanged and which should not be changed under any circumstances. Second, under the aegis of multiculturalism, local authorities have sought to deal with minority communities through the so-called leaders who are not really their true representatives.
Thus, instead of attaining the objective of greater participation of the minority communities in the public domain, multiculturalism has further distanced them. As Vertovec (1996: 224, 233) notes, the cultural underpinnings of multiculturalism inadvertently support the hierarchical and separatist assumptions surrounding “culture” and reproduce the status quo rather than provide an alternative to a majority hegemony. Local administrators who try to communicate with the communities through their leaders, increase the authority of the patriarchs at the expense of individuals, as most of them head oligarchical organisations.

*Diasporic Identities*

The social reality and the life experiences of the second and third generation Asians are far removed from the diasporic experiences of the Asian immigrants when they first migrated to Britain. In spite of the uprooting and displacement and their adjustment to a different social, economic and cultural reality, the Asian immigrants continued to regard their place of origin as their home. This is not the case for the second and third generation Asians who have negotiated an existence which is remarkably different from their parents. Theirs is a life which has been marked with reconfigurations and transformations of social relations, institutions, and a broadening of cultural boundaries. For them, home is not the country from where their parents emigrated, but then is Britain their home?

Avtar Brah (1996: 190-198) in her attempt to theorise the concept of diaspora makes a distinction between home and feeling at home. She writes, “The question of home, is intrinsically linked with the way in which process of inclusion and exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of ‘belonging.’” So, one may feel at home in Britain but still claim to be an Asian. This is basically to affirm an identity which is perceived as being rejected by a racism that claims “Britishness” for the indigenous population alone. On the other
hand, another person with a similar background might seek to repudiate the same process of exclusion by asserting a British Asian identity. It is the different circumstances of the two individuals, their own subjectivities that determine their separate positions. Thus, identities are formed in a process where rather than remaining static and unchanging, they are characterised by plural configurations.

Notion of Honour

Finally, the notion of honour or izzat is central to the understanding of the attitudes and response of the family and the community to the runaway girls. The preoccupation with the honour of girls has structural implications. This has been clearly illustrated by Yalman (1963: 25-58) in his essay on the purity of women among the castes of Ceylon and Malabar. He argues that the obsession with female purity among castes is linked to the maintenance of caste purity, as it is through women that the purity of the caste community is ensured and preserved. So women may have contact with superior or pure men, but sexual relations with men of lower ritual status leads to severe retaliation. Relations with men lower than themselves pollute them, and may result in the bearing of polluted children who will not be entitled to caste membership. Therefore, in order to ensure that only legitimate children enter into the caste system, the purity of women needs to be protected and their sexuality controlled. Any violation of chastity entailed the loss of caste, social status and total segregation from the family.

This principle can be extended to understand the anxiety regarding the izzat of girls as the South Asian groups in Britain tended to reproduce caste and sectarian communities along with their regional and linguistic identities. Due to the different social situation and the process of social change that was experienced, caste in Britain was not an exact replica of the caste in South Asia. However, in reproducing caste and sectarian communities, they also recreated a cardinal
structure that helped to preserve the identities of particular groups. This was the principle of endogamy according to which all the marriages should occur within the community of one’s affiliation and not outside it. Although hypergamy was not practised among all the groups but the belief that the groom's family should be superior was a common feeling of most South Asian groups in Britain (Barot 1999: 167).

Observance of the rules of endogamy and hypergamy necessitated the marriage of girls within a particular community. Until then their chastity needed to be preserved lest they formed alliances with impure men of ritually lower status which would entail a loss of caste and social standing, both for the girl and for the family, and would dilute their identities. Hence the purity or izzat of girls had to be safeguarded in order to protect the honour of the family and the community, to maintain the social distance between groups and to preserve their identities. The act of running away thus encountered a hostile response from the families and the community. This was validated by the response of the respondents in this study.

2. Limits of the Study

Perhaps the most fundamental limitation of this study has been the small number of the respondents. In spite of my best efforts I was unable to get more respondents for this study. The reasons for the reluctance of the respondents to participate in this research have been discussed in the first chapter. Though I have tried to compensate for the small number by collecting data which was qualitatively rich, at times it became difficult to analyse the situation, especially in the case of Bangladeshis as there were only two respondents from this community.
There is not enough academic work done in this particular area and so there is barely any literature available in this field. The complete dependence on primary data and lack of secondary sources made it impossible to have a point of reference.

Another lacuna of this work was the lack of a control group that could be studied along with the group of runaways. Due to a limitation of time for fieldwork, limited funds to carry out the research, and the practical problem of finding a group which would closely match the profile of the runaway girls, it was not possible to employ such a group for this study.

The scope of this research did not allow me to incorporate the beliefs and views of the Asian parents whose daughters had left home. As a result, arguments sometimes appear to be one-sided and lack balance. The parents' side of the debate can be a topic of research and has been recommended as such in the next section.

3. Further Research

Although substantive research has been conducted on diaspora studies, overseas Indians and British Asians, a systematic study of second and third generation Asians living in Britain has barely begun. There is thus an enormous scope for further research on this particular subject. However, I will concentrate on some major areas of immediate relevance.

The literature that is available on Asian youth in Britain concentrates on specific areas, and is at best disjointed in nature. There is a need for an in-depth study of the group as a whole or at least, of the sub-groups, for example, the Pakistanis, the Indians, etc. There is a need to focus not just on their problems but also their beliefs and values, their aspirations and the future of their communities as they see it. This would also make it possible to undertake comparative studies of ethnic
minority groups at different levels – various local Asian groups, Asians and Afro-Caribbeans and Asians in Britain against Asian communities in Canada, United States, New Zealand, etc.

The present study on runaway Asian girls was conducted on the basis of data that was collected from the girls themselves. Hence, it offers their perspective on the various aspects of the problem and is oriented towards them. An empirical research to gauge the reaction and attitude of the parents or the elders of the community towards this specific problem and other related issues would provide an alternative viewpoint. This would also help in filling the gap in the existing body of knowledge.

I have pointed out that parents expect their daughters to conform to the same social, cultural and religious values and beliefs that they themselves followed. Is there a relation between minority status and a greater need to seek cultural and social sustenance from one’s own background? In other words, this relates to the question of identitarian politics vs. class politics. It would be interesting to investigate whether a co-relation exists between the two.

There are other social problems that affect young Asian girls which need to be investigated, especially in the light of a study by Veena Soni Raleigh of Surrey University (see Natt 1996), which reveals that the suicide rate among women of Asian origin below 35 years of age is twice the national average. This research, using suicide data for England and Wales for 1988-1992, found that though suicide forms a relatively small proportion of the overall mortality rate, it constitutes 20 per cent of mortality among young Asian women in the age group of 15-34. Empirical studies on domestic violence, high rate of unemployment among Pakistani men, low scholastic performance among some sections of Asian girls, denial of education and career opportunities, etc., could perhaps explain the downward spiral of depression among Asian girls and women.
Finally, it would be interesting to undertake a follow-up study of the respondents of this research to determine how they have fared over the years. It is possible that some of them might have returned home. Yet, such a study would provide an invaluable insight into the changing perception that individuals have of institutions such as family, marriage, relationships, especially with their parents and partners, and issues, particularly those that relate to racism and cultural identity.