

World in a neighbourhood

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Imran Choudry, a burly, good-natured man from Pakistan, runs a Spar grocery shop in the Raval. He has won the loyalty of his customers by opening seven days a week and working up to 14 hours a day. In 10 years, he has taken almost no time off. When asked if he ever took holidays, he responded with a chuckle. "There'll be time for holidays when I'm dead."

Choudry is one face of the Raval, a dense and colourful tapestry of a neighbourhood made up of people from more than 70 different countries. The area is all the more remarkable for the relative peace that reigns amid such diversity.



"We're like a big family here in the Raval," said Fatima Ahmed, Moroccan spokeswoman for the Ibn Batuta association for immigrants. "Like any big family, there's going to be some squabbling, but you work it out. The real problem is the lack of adequate public services, such as day-care centres for working parents."

Raul Martínez, author of an extensive study on coexistence in the Raval published in mid-2007 by the Casal dels Infants del Raval, agreed that life in the neighbourhood is harmonious given its density and diversity. "There are no real conflicts between different immigrant groups. There are some isolated cases of delinquents versus shop owners, but not much else. Long-time local residents, however, may feel that the former, small-town feel is gone because they don't know who their new neighbours are. But all they have to do is get to know them a little."

The Raval has long been a gateway for new arrivals in the city. Throughout the 20th century, and particularly in the Fifties and Sixties, successive waves of Spanish immigrants arrived in Barcelona from Andalusia, Galicia and Extremadura in search of work, and settled in the Raval because of the neighbourhood's affordable rent. For more than a century, the neighbourhood also had the reputation of being the city's hidden face, its no-go land, a place of lewd entertainment, bohemian lifestyles, vice and crime.

As soon as they were financially able, most of those earlier Spanish immigrants moved out of the neighbourhood to more respectable areas of town, leaving behind increasingly rundown buildings and infrastructure. Meanwhile, in the Eighties, gung-ho city planners began designing large-scale projects to revamp the area. The implicit aim was to open up the Raval to the rest of the city by turning it into a kind of cultural theme park.

The MACBA, CCCB and Santa Monica art centres were built, the Liceu opera house was rebuilt, and the broad Rambla del Raval (which will shortly see the inauguration of an 11-storey luxury hotel and a brand new multi-screen Filmoteca) was opened. In making these well-laid (and costly) plans, however, city planners didn't foresee, and were caught off-guard by, the massive arrival of non-European immigrants in the neighbourhood starting in the mid-Nineties.

"Up until about six years ago, no one in City Hall paid any attention to us," said Javid Mughal, a Pakistani who has lived in Barcelona for 15 years. Like most of his fellow countrymen in the city, Mughal is from the Punjab region of Pakistan and came to Barcelona in search of a better life. He runs a copy shop in the lower Raval and edits the weekly *El Mirador dels Inmigrants* newspaper in Urdu.

"When we arrived in the Raval, the area was very rundown, there were rats in the old shop premises," Mughal told *Metropolitan*. "We brought life into the neighbourhood with

our shops and services. People respect us because we work hard. We also pay our taxes, but despite this, we can't vote, which I don't think is fair."

Over half of the Raval's approximately 46,000 residents are foreigners, with the 4,500-strong Pakistani community forming the largest immigrant group in the neighbourhood, according to the latest figures from the Ajuntament. Like a few other non-European communities, such as the Filipinos, the Pakistani community has its own leaders and hierarchy. "The Pakistani community here has an internal structure of its own," said author and sociologist Jordi Moreras. "When they arrived in larger numbers about eight or nine years ago, they didn't seek any official assistance from the local government, but instead took care of themselves. There was no real official contact until about five or six years ago, when not just men but whole families began to arrive."

The self-contained nature of the Pakistani community has attracted criticism from some long-time local residents. "Sure they work long hours, but they also grossly exploit their own workers, many of whom don't have legal working status," said restaurant owner Andres Cobo. "It's practically a medieval system of labour right here in the centre of the city."

Ibn Batuta's Fatima Ahmed agreed that exploitation exists, not only in some Pakistani businesses but elsewhere too. She said, however, that this exploitation has to be put into context. "People come here to work, and they'll take what they can find. It's the government's responsibility to make it possible for them to work legally. It seems, however, that it's in the interest of the administration and society to keep most immigrants doing only certain types of menial jobs."

For Ahmed, the lack of adequate social services in the Raval is proof of this attitude. "Europeans say 'Yes, we need workers, but not their families,' because families have a cost."

Massive, non-European immigration in the city is so new that the local administration can perhaps be forgiven for being caught off-guard. Núria Paricio, general director of the Tot Raval foundation, which acts as an umbrella organisation for over 50 business, social and cultural associations in the neighbourhood, admitted that there was no model in place to deal with the quickly changing demographics. "We realised we needed to get people from all the different sectors and communities to start talking to each other about life in the neighbourhood, and to participate in common projects. Many people just don't have time to integrate because they're working, but today's coexistence is tomorrow's integration."

One sign of the neighbourhood's health was the lack of any serious street level conflict after the much-publicised January detention of 10 presumed Islamic terrorists of Pakistani origin in the area. While Internet forums and readers' comments posted on *La Vanguardia's* website buzzed with highly negative and prejudiced responses targeting Muslims, and particularly Pakistanis, life in the Raval itself went on as usual. No racist graffiti appeared, nobody looked at anybody differently.

"The law will do its job," said Javid Mughal, referring to the incident. "The detainees will be shown to be guilty or not, but we here in the Pakistani community are not terrorists and we condemn any form of terrorism."

Raul Martínez from the Casal dels Infants' said he kept a watchful eye out after the detentions to see how people in the neighbourhood would respond. "To be honest, I was surprised," he said. "After all the media sensationalism, there was very little, if any reaction here in the neighbourhood. People basically just want to get on with life."

A native Catalan resident of the Raval, Eduard Resbier, a painter, echoed these sentiments. "People here are like any other people," he said. "The Pakistanis I know come here to live, not to die."