

## **The Asian Diaspora: Contribution to Society and Integration through Generations**

Living in one of the most diverse cities in the world, it is easy to see people of different cultures and ethnicities every day. What often goes unseen is the contribution each diaspora brings to London and the difficulty they have faced integrating into a different society. The Asian diaspora is one of the most well known and recognized in London because of the large population of people and their obvious contributions to British society. After World War II, many Asians immigrated to London because of their contributions to the war effort and the dissolution of the British Empire. Since this time, the Asian diaspora has made many contributions to British culture, especially in London, and have become very integrated into society. Still, the connection between the homeland and Britain often remains in existence, as many still struggle to integrate into society. The question, then, is whether as time passes successive generations of immigrants become more integrated into society and essentially, more British than their parents. The answer to this question is not an easy one, for it very much depends on each situation. Children of immigrant parents who raise their kids as more Asian than British may grow up to feel more connected to their country of ethnicity than to the country in which they were raised. Conversely, children who are raised as British instead of Asian may feel more connected to Britain than to their Asian background. The answer to the question of Asian integration success, then, is situational and depends very much on how each person connects to British society. The Asian diaspora, despite this question of integration, has made great contributions to society in London and Britain itself.

Much of the recent immigration to the United Kingdom is the result of the British Empire. At its height, the British Empire was the largest in history and the leading power

of the world. The results of the empire include a legacy and influence around the world in areas including politics, language, infrastructure, economics, and culture. The empire stretched across vast land areas, including South East Asia. For example, Queen Victoria in the nineteenth century was named Empress of India because of her influence and success in that part of the world. The empire stretched across continents and touched the far off parts of the world. It was said that “the sun never sets on the British Empire” because of its vast empire stretching across the globe. The result of World War II brought the creation of several immigrant diasporas in nations across Western Europe, especially the United Kingdom. According to Judith Brown, “The Partition of India at the end of the British Raj led to the movement of some 17.5 million people across the new borders” (Brown, 134). Many people from different nations of the empire served in the war or contributed to the war effort, and for this reason many immigration restrictions were lifted. India, for example, provided two million men for the Allied forces (*History Today*). In addition, Britons appreciated the efforts from the nations across the world. After the war, many immigrants came to the United Kingdom, especially settling in London. Economic opportunity became a great pull factor, as well, leading many immigrants to the nation, especially from Asian countries when the British Empire was dissolved in that area. Immigrants came to London in search of work and better lives for future generations. London, therefore, became one of the most diverse cities in the world, and the Asian population grew exponentially. Today, almost 21 percent of Londoners are Asian or mixed Asian (*2011 Census*), a vast increase and large percentage of society. For this reason, the Asian diaspora has a great influence on British culture.

The Asian diaspora in Britain has made numerous contributions to society, possibly more than any other diaspora in the United Kingdom. The South Asian diaspora has long been an essential part of the labour force in various industries. Many South Asians excel in jobs in manufacturing, hospitality, or health care. In more recent years, Asians have found success in “entrepreneurship and profitable businesses in industries from fashion to property to steel” (South Asian Concern). In addition, expertise in the sciences and information technology has been extremely important in the Western world. New technologies and ideas may not have been possible without the knowledge and capabilities of the Asian diaspora in Britain. The Asian contributions the arts have also been immense. According to South Asian Concern, an organization dedicated to raising the issues of diversity, racism, and multiculturalism and highlighting the contributions of the Asian diaspora, “Many South Asian writers have made their mark on English literature, winning literary prizes and topping bestseller lists. There is a South Asian presence on the stage and screen... and in the music industry” (South Asian Concern). The Asian diaspora has also rendered much more media attention in recent years in comparison to that of the past. The 2002 hit movie, *Bend it Like Beckham*, highlights the life of immigrants and their children from the South Asian diaspora living in Britain, through the sports arena. In addition, the critically acclaimed and Academy Award winning film, *Slumdog Millionaire*, brings to light the differences in cultures between the Asian diaspora and the Western world. These movies are only two examples of media attention the Asian diaspora has procured in recent years. Asian fashion and Eastern religions have also created diversity in British society and brought new ideas through the Asian influence.

One of the most well-known and appreciated contributions of the Asian diaspora in the United Kingdom is the Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani food that have become extremely popular. Curry seems to be a staple in British kitchens and diets, and the famous meal, Chicken Tikka Masala is now a British national dish because of its popularity. This contribution to British society epitomizes multiculturalism. As one of Britain's national dishes, Chicken Tikka Masala proves the great impact of the South Asian diaspora in Britain and its integration in British society.

The question then, is how much do those living in Britain appreciate these contributions? Many argue they are not appreciated enough in society, since many South Asians still feel discriminated against, and believe that there is a need for more recognition of this South Asian influence. Brown argues,

There is an urgent need for historians and other students of British society to recognize that the South Asian Diaspora and its experience is a vital part of Britain's own past and present for the diversity and dynamism it brings to British society and culture, and the economic and other contributions South Asians make to Britain (Brown 126).

Multiculturalism has become a hot-button issue in British society, especially as immigration continued through the twentieth century. Many immigrants are faced with the dilemma of choosing between assimilation to the new culture and how best to integrate into British society and culture. As they carry with them traditions and culture of their home country, they create greater diversity in Britain. Many of the South Asian ethnic population have taken root in Britain while maintain much of their cultural distinctiveness (Peach 144). But this integration is not simple. Jantinder Verma asks, "Under what circumstances do people elide their differences of class, religion—indeed, even of race, of

colour? When do those differences suddenly matter, and matter to the extent that they can separate or even rupture a family or a group of people?" (Verma 208). Multiculturalism promotes diversity in Britain, but does it also divide people into groups that can easily be discriminated against? Does it alienate immigrant and ethnic groups from British society and give those groups less of a voice? The goal, then, is to take the aforementioned contributions to British society and use them as a platform for promoting the rights and contributions of those immigrants. Verma attempted to give South Asians and other immigrant groups a voice through the arts, mainly, theatre. Verma explains, "Our aim... was to give ourselves a voice, to find a voice on the public stage. The fact that one of the consequences of finding a voice was to enable other immigrant generations to achieve their own voice was a by-product of that primary aim" (Verma 204).

Of course, it is not only the Asian diaspora that faces these problems in the United Kingdom. As explained by Daniel Burdsey, "Different cultures are viewed as being inherently incompatible and those minorities that do not share the dominant values of western societies are believed to represent a threat to their cohesion and, therefore, their social stability" (Burdsey 15). Interestingly, however, Rahsaan Maxwell compares integration and a feeling of Britishness between diasporas in the article, "Caribbean and South Asian Identification with British Society: The Importance of Perceived Discrimination." Maxwell finds that Caribbeans tend to be more incorporated into British society than South Asians, economically, socially and culturally. Therefore, he argues, Caribbeans should have a higher level of positive British identification than South Asians. However, he notes, "Instead, South Asians have higher levels of positive attachment to British identity" (Maxwell 1450). The article suggests that it is not integration that creates

a sense of Britishness, but rather, acceptance. Maxwell adds, "The variation in levels of expected discrimination may help account for the fact that Caribbeans are less likely than South Asians to have positive British identification" (Maxwell 1453). This article begins to address the issues of multiculturalism, integration, discrimination and a sense of belonging to British society. While this sense of belonging is ideal, do immigrants and families of migrants feel this attachment more to British society or to their home culture?

Ceri Peach, in "South Asian Migration and Settlement in Great Britain: 1951-2001," addresses some possible reasons that South Asians in Britain may not feel a sense of belonging in society. Peach argues that differences in religion, culture, language, economics, and ways of life create discrimination in British society, especially looking at the lives of Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants. Peach argues,

Socio-religio-cultural identity seems to have put a heavy cost on Pakistani and Bangladeshi Life. Low academic qualifications, a poor occupational profile, high concentrations in areas of economic and housing difficulty, high unemployment rates for men and very low economic activity levels for women, coupled with the pressures of mistrust that have followed the events of 9/11 and 7/7, have increased their sense of alienation from mainstream British society (Peach 144).

The mistrust Peach uncovers is a key factor in the discrimination against South Asians and many immigrants in general. It is very difficult for British South Asians to integrate into society, or, for that matter, find their own voice, when they face discrimination or fear from the people who surround them. Even in, arguably, the most diverse city in the world, Londoners still face these problems of discrimination.

Beyond the problems immigrants face when leaving their home country and journeying to Britain are the problems and difficulties their children and future generations may have. Brown addresses the issue of a long-term migration process as well,

noting that the progression of migration changes and evolves as years pass, affecting many generations in the future. She argues,

Diversity is also increased by the obvious fact that migration is a long-term process achieved over several generations. It is, therefore, a 'given' in our thinking that migration is not a single journey, but one phase in a far longer term process of movement and change that often starts within South Asia itself and continues over decades and generations after one (or several) international movements. It is this long-term process that has produced a diverse and significant South Asian Diaspora within the United Kingdom, as well as globally (Brown 126).

Migration is a long-term process, and integration is a challenge. Migrants who come to the United Kingdom in search of a better life and assimilate into British culture completely, will probably raise children who feel more "British" than "Asian." Those families who raise their children with the cultural beliefs, norms, and values of their native culture, however, may raise children who feel they are outsiders in Britain. Saeeda Shah and Iqbal Muhammad explained this best noting, "The nature and scale of the challenges and issues vary in each case and context, and even over generations. These issues become more sensitive and poignant when underpinned by cultural and belief systems" (Shah 770). Therefore, this creates challenges for the children who are raised in Britain but are unsure of which culture to identify with. Some argue that young British Asians have a richer and more diverse life, having the best of both worlds, while others believe they don't feel as if they belong to either culture completely. Burdsey's article, "If I Ever Play Football, Dad, can I play for England or India?: British Asians, Sport and Diasporic National Identities" takes an interesting angle on this issue of South Asian children's identification with Britain. Through the arena of sport, and through the views of children, much is said for multiculturalism, integration, and identification with a certain culture. The author argues

through his research that despite tension and exclusion that continues in British society, “increasing numbers of young British Asians are expressing support for the England football team” (Burdsey 12). Cricket fans, on the other hand, he argues, tend to identify more with their ethnic background. This begs an interesting question: Has British multiculturalism created a country where people are more loyal to a particular sub-culture than the nation itself?

Ultimately, how much a British South Asian identifies with either culture depends upon how integrated they became into British society. According to Vanessa Burholt and G. Clare Wenger, in the article, “Migration from South Asia to the United Kingdom and the Maintenance of Transnational Intergenerational Relationships,” the extended family is important to most South Asians. The authors explore the ways that new cultures, as well as different technologies, change the relationships between family members as generations pass. This impact on transnationalism, which can be overlooked when addressing immigrants in Britain, depends also on how integrated each person or family becomes into British society. Those who wish to forget the lives they had in Asia may come to Britain and become more British than Asian, while those who still have strong ties to their native country may keep more of their culture, and, therefore, their relationships to home. This is often the pattern when it comes to second and third generations of immigrants. Often, when children are raised in a more Asian environment than a British one, these children feel more connected to their ethnic background as they grow up. According to Fazila Bhimhi’s article, “Cosmopolitan belonging and diaspora: second-generation British Muslim women travelling to South Asia,” which traces the ways British born women self-identify with Britain and South Asia, the women studied usually identified some with both cultures.



For example, “they self-identify with South Asia because of South Asian culture’s emphasis on the family and express openness and tolerance toward their parents’ homeland... At the same time, they consider Britain to be their home because they find that women have relatively greater independence and rights” (Bhimhi 414). Most people who find themselves torn between two cultures usually feel connected to both, or connected to neither.

The South Asian diaspora in Britain has made innumerable contributions to society, and their influence has been immense. Still, most British South Asians, whether immigrants or first- or second-generation British citizens, face problems of discrimination and challenges of integration. In the most multicultural city in the world, it is important to remember these contributions and allow South Asians to have a voice in British society, and appreciate the struggle of maintaining an ethnic home and a newfound home in Britain. Ultimately, the degree to which someone feels “British” depends on how connected they feel to their native land. Therefore, the successive generations will feel connected to whichever place they feel is truly their home.

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