



Salil Tripathi

A tale of two communities

Multiculturalism in London and Leicester

"As Britain becomes a more multicultural society [...] a clearer understanding of communities is vital. To achieve that, multiculturalism will have to be divorced from political correctness." Focusing on two migrant communities in the UK — the Bangladeshis in London's Tower Hamlets and the Ugandan Indians in Leicester — Salil Tripathi finds that while business may be the great integrator, cultural tensions have not disappeared. Understanding differences between communities means abandoning multiculturalist clichés about the "Asian community".



I live in the outer periphery of North London, with access to the M25, the orbital motorway closer to me than the River Thames. As I go towards central London, I pass by Golders Green, where I see a large building festooned with tiny triangular flags. Outwardly, the pink brick structure looks like a church; as a matter of fact, it was a Presbyterian Church until about a quarter century ago.

Church attendance has been falling in the UK, as in much of Europe. But over weekends, neighbours complain that it is almost impossible to find parking spaces in the busy area, as hundreds of people come to visit the structure.

The visitors are Hindus of the Swaminarayana sect and have been using this old church as their temple. In September 2005, they secured the permission from the local council to demolish the current structure and build a large Hindu temple in its place. Concern over parking was the chief concern raised by some councillors who opposed the building. But they were outvoted.

The new Hindu temple will be made of pale pink stone and it will be a grand, symmetrical Indian-style temple, increasing its floor space from 1277 m² to 2898 m². It will be 7.5 m high at its tallest point. The front of the building is planned to have three main sections: the middle will comprise the entrance, flanked by two large pillars, and at each side will be two sections, each three metres wide with additional entrances.

This effortless transformation of a church into a temple is in marked contrast to what happens in India when a place of worship changes hands. In a spectacular case in the northern Indian town of Ayodhya, thousands of angry Hindus climbed atop a sixteenth-century mosque called Babri Masjid and razed it in one day, 6 December 1992, to seek revenge for a perceived historical wrong. The idea behind the razing was not only to reclaim space, but also to establish a firm boundary in India; to remind Muslims that while they may be Indian citizens, in India it is the majority community, the Hindus, that calls the shots. In the aftermath of the destruction, which was overseen by a man who went on

to become India's deputy prime minister, thousands of people were killed, an overwhelmingly large proportion of them Muslims.

What appears to explain the contrast between the way Hindus in India and in Europe responded to their need — a temple dedicated to their God — is instructive. In India, where Hindus formed a majority, they disregarded the rule of law to reclaim urban space. In Britain, where they are in a minority, they secured the space by following the law. They lost their application once; they returned better prepared, argued their case, and won the day.

But this story is not about how European rule of law permits peaceful solutions. Rather, it is about how societies view various cultures and people within a society, and how various communities negotiate space. Further examples suggest a picture that is less stark, less black and white, more nuanced. In Ayodhya, Hindus in India showed violent intolerance to a structure they did not like, and despite the nation's multi-faith heritage, resorted to violence; in Britain, minority communities are increasingly showing less faith in institutional structures and are depending on mob rule to seek their goals, even though Britain has greater acceptance of certain practices in the name of multiculturalism. In the same India, Muslims are able to occupy prime space on roads in the afternoons when it is time for prayer, because their tiny mosques are unable to accommodate the increasing flock of believers; this has prompted Hindus also to demand access to public space in which to conduct their religious activities. And in Britain, it is becoming harder for a Muslim woman to cover herself fully, to wear a *niqab*, and to pursue certain professions. What will be next? Will Sikh teachers be forced to remove their turbans? Fat teachers told to lose weight?

East London. On a balmy afternoon, with an unexpected breeze making London's hot summer bearable, nearly sixty men and two women have turned out in front of a government building on Brick Lane. Most of the men carrying the banners and shouting slogans are middle-aged; this postprandial exertion is probably the only exercise they will get this week. Some have well-trimmed beards, but many look as if they haven't shaved. Their placards say that Monica Ali's novel, *Brick Lane*, which is being made into a film, is full of "lies", "slander", and "cynicism". When they are not offering blurb-length reviews of a book many of them have not read, they praise themselves as "hard-working" and "industrious". (And indeed they are: of the nearly 12 000 "Indian" restaurants in Britain, nearly 90 per cent are owned by Bangladeshi immigrants.) In their haste, two have misspelled their homeland, calling it "Bagladesh". One of their rhythmic slogans says:

Maro maro joota maro
Monica-ke gaaler maro

[Hit hard, use your shoes to hit hard,
Slap Monica's cheeks, hit her hard]

They have promised to burn the book, and I've come to witness it. From Girolamo Savonarola in the fifteenth century to the Nazis in the 1930s, book burnings have been ominous. The last public book burning in Britain was in Bradford in 1989, when a group of Muslims burned Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. I ask a police officer about it, and he tells me there's no law against burning books. "You can burn the Union Jack, if you like," he says; according to the law, the police would only act if someone complains. "It is only paper and words bound together," he says, smiling as if to reassure me.

In the end, they don't burn Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Other shopkeepers continue their business, some shaking their heads as the marchers walk down the lane, before retiring to Altab Ali Park, where several people speak simultaneously about how hurt they are; how Ali, who is only half-Bangladeshi and married to a "white man" and not from this area, does not portray a positive image of Bangladeshis; and while Ali may have the right to write, they too have the right to protest. A few men strum the strings of a folk instrument, and a Bangladeshi woman dances, prompting a few bare-chested drunks (white) to get up and start gyrating.

This is not an amicable picnic. The protestors don't need to do more, because they have already won. Ruby Films surrendered and announced that it would not be filming *Brick Lane* in Brick Lane. Germaine Greer supported the protesters in an essay, chiding Ali for her insensitivity in misrepresenting Bangladeshis: "As British people know little and care less about the Bangladeshi people in their midst, their first appearance as characters in an English novel had the force of a defining caricature."¹ Greer had refused to support Rushdie at the height of the fatwa crisis, and Rushdie dutifully responds, calling her essay "philistine, sanctimonious, and disgraceful, but not unexpected."²

How did we get here? To understand that, recall the Bradford burning. That was the time to take sides between free expression and censorship. Over the years, the multiculturally sound, politically correct ethos eroded the argument, and, exploiting that liberal failure, a few hotheads from every religion have got bolder, demanding bans on anything they don't like. Instead of upholding the right to offend, Britain is busy building the architecture that would canonize the right to feel offended. Lest something might hurt someone, writers and artists, filmmakers and satirists, must learn to swallow their words.

Britain believes in fair play, so there's equal opportunity to feel offended. In January 2005, the British Broadcasting Corporation received some 47 000 complaints about its screening of "Jerry Springer: The Opera". A month earlier, an irate Christian toppled wax statues of soccer star David Beckham and his wife Victoria as Joseph and Mary at Madam Tussaud's. In December 2004, nearly 300 Sikhs attacked the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, where the play *Behzti* (dishonour) was running. That play was set in a Sikh temple, in which a holy man rapes a devotee's daughter. The play closed. Earlier this year, a Hindu group attacked a leading London gallery and succeeded in closing a rare exhibition of paintings by India's most famous contemporary artist, Maqbool Fida Husain, because he painted Hindu goddesses in the nude. Then the circus moved to Brick Lane, where another self-appointed bunch of "community elders" won the day. Reflecting the mood, most British editors congratulated themselves on not publishing those Danish cartoons early in 2006.

Instead of defending the artist, the British Government chose to acquiesce, proposing legislation that would outlaw vaguely defined hate speech, or words and images that promote racial or religious hatred. Fiona Mactaggart, minister for racial equality until May 2006, said after the closure of the play in Birmingham: "When people are moved by theatre to protest [...] it is a great thing [...] that is a sign of the free speech which is so much a part of the British tradition."

Nobody says that people don't have the right to feel offended. The question is what you do with that right, and what the state should do as the guarantor of

freedoms. The offended can switch off their TV sets, refuse to buy the book, call for a boycott, and picket against the play or filming. But when a mob drives film-makers away, closes an exhibition or a play, threatens violence, and scares the artist to go into hiding, the state has the responsibility to protect the artist's freedom. That's where the British establishment is giving up, argues Melanie Phillips in her angry book, *Londonistan: How Britain is creating a terror state within*. Some of her arguments are alarmist, but her central concern — that in appeasement, Britain is missing the point — remains valid.

So it isn't just about words on paper.

In his 1821 play, *Almansor*, Heinrich Heine wrote: "Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen." [Where they burn books, in the end they will also burn people.] One summer morning sixteen years after the Bradford burning, three young men from towns near Bradford left their homes and took the train to central London, where they were joined by another friend. They boarded different underground trains and a bus, wearing backpacks. In a few minutes, almost simultaneously, they exploded bombs, obliterating not only their lives, but of those of 52 others, injuring hundreds more.

And there were warning signs, to be found in words on paper: in *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie wrote about "a city visible but unseen". Hanif Kureishi foresaw radicalization in *The Black Album* and in *My Son the Fanatic*. In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali expressed hope, through her protagonist Nazneen, that a different future was possible. Nazneen is the 19-year-old bride who comes to Brick Lane from Bangladesh to marry a 40-year-old man who hankers to return home. She transforms into a free-spirited woman, and opts to remain in Britain when her husband chooses to leave. In a revealing episode in the novel, as she is hesitant about learning to skate, her friend Razia laces her boots and tells her: "This is England. You can do whatever you like."

What is particularly sad is that this protest had to happen in Brick Lane, which is no ordinary London district. While associated with the Bangladeshi community today, for centuries this part of London has been open to outsiders of all hues, allowing them to mingle with the local community before they move on. In a fascinating article about Spitalfields, *The Economist* describes how, "On most Fridays, you will find shoes spilling down the steps of the Jame-e-masjid mosque in Spitalfields. The main doors, giving on to Fournier Street, are thrown open, the prayers of the faithful mingle with the noise of the perpetual building work in the City, a short way to the west."³ A century ago, you would have found similar prayer meetings on Fridays; but the bearded men would not have worn their little hats, but yarmulkes. They spoke in Yiddish, if not Hebrew, and not Bengali. Until 1976, the building at the corner of Brick Lane was a synagogue. Earlier, Methodists used it; and they had acquired it from Huguenots, who were Calvinists escaping from France.

That mosque is a bricks-and-mortar reminder to those Britons who think that immigration is a new and harmful phenomenon. The street is a veritable walk through urban history, showing how a poor neighbourhood has gradually transformed from being the home of one community to another. French Protestants, or Huguenots, everyone's favourite migrants, came to London in the sixteenth century with their Swiss and Walloon cousins. The Edict of Nantes had given them some security, yet a quarter million fled for calmer shores. Nearly 50 000 came to England as refugees, bringing with them silk-weaving skills. Around half settled in Spitalfields, close to the Thames,

where raw silk from Italy and China was unloaded. Since they were outside the City, they were not bound by the restrictions of the City's guilds. Their windows were big to let in the light, they planted mulberry for their silkworms, and had caged birds to soften the sounds of their looms.

In the mid-eighteenth century, they sought permission to build a new church. *The Economist* recalls⁴ that the Neuve Eglise was a brick building with a stone cornice and plenty of windows, "its austere yet elegant classicism contrasting sharply with its neighbour's Baroque exuberance". The Huguenots were different from their successors in three ways: they were white, they were from Europe, and they were Protestants. England did not like the Pope at that time, and the Huguenots were valorized and collections were held for them.

Yet they were blamed for starting the Great Fire of 1666. And that they spoke French did not endear them to some. By the 1700s, some newspapers were calling them "scum". London was getting overcrowded; the Huguenots were not at fault; however, like most migrants, they bore the brunt of the blame. There were anti-French riots in the late seventeenth century and people complained that nobody spoke English in Spitalfields — a complaint repeated decades later when the area turned Jewish, and later, Bengali. Over the generations, the Huguenots took up other professions, married the English, moved out of Spitalfields, leaving behind streets reminiscent of a bygone era, with names like Fleur-de-Lis, Leman, Fournier.

By the 1850s, Charles Dickens was writing about Spitalfields's "squalid streets, lying like narrow black trenches [...] where sallow, unshaven weavers [...] prowl languidly about, or lean against posts, or sit brooding on doorsteps." Irish refugees of the potato famine came next; the Huguenot weavers who still lived there protested at the arrival of cheaper workers. This was when Spitalfields became "the East End" of the popular imagination: liminal, lawless, deprived, and depraved. As *The Economist* writes, "To visiting writers and sociologists it was 'the Abyss', 'the Empire of Hunger', and 'the City of Dreadful Night'. All the bad publicity made it an affordable place of settlement for the Jews who began to arrive in droves in the 1880s."

Jewish immigration rose between the 1880s and 1914 and was the result of persecution in Russia; war and revolution drove another two million Jews out of eastern Europe. Some used London as a watering hole on their way to Liverpool or New York. But others stayed. Like other communities that were later to cluster around London's airports and railway stations (think of the Sikhs in Southall and Hounslow), the Jews settled mainly in Spitalfields and Whitechapel, close to their point of arrival at the docks. Today, the Jews have also moved on.

Like the Huguenots, the Jews had the advantage of being white. But as the Jack the Ripper murders of 1888 illustrated, they were convenient scapegoats and not immune from blame. Besides "scum" they were also called "vermin". There were tensions between the old, established Jewish families and the newcomers. As one of the new arrivals put it, the "English" Jews thought of their co-religionists as "ignorant beggars, as barbarians, who must be civilized through Sabbath sermons, soup kitchens, and such like". Devout Jews thought of English Jews as apostates.

In 1891 the Machzike Hadath ("upholders of the law") Society was formed to promote religious orthodoxy. In 1898, they moved into the Neuve Eglise, marching down Brick Lane in procession with their scrolls and a band. They

reorganized the pews and made a shrine on the eastern wall. The building became the Spitalfields Great Synagogue. During WWII, the area was heavily bombed. The Spitalfields Great Synagogue was damaged; though renovated, by the 1970s it had fallen into disrepair. In 1976, the Jame-e-masjid Trust bought the building for the Bangladeshi community.

The big boom in Bangladeshi migration — mostly from the eastern Sylhet region — came in the 1950s and early 1960s. Though natural disasters and political instability played a part, the influx was driven more by economics than the previous Huguenot and Jewish immigration waves. Families or small villages pooled resources to send a young man to *bidesh* (foreign land). Villages that prospered through their remittances became known as *Londoni*. By the early 1960s, British immigration rules had changed; most newcomers today have married someone already in the UK. Like the Huguenots and Jews, the Bangladeshis started work mainly in textiles and sewing machines hummed in the Spitalfields sweatshops once again.

Tower Hamlets, the borough that now contains Spitalfields, plays host to the largest community of Bangladeshis outside their native country. The streets around Brick Lane are now "Banglatown". In place of the kosher butchers and cheese-makers, you have sari centres and *halal* shops. And at the corner of Fournier Street stands the Jame-e-masjid mosque. Apart from a sign in Arabic, Bengali, and English, the building's exterior looks much the same as it ever did. A plan to add a minaret was turned down by the council. Inside, things are different. Except for the chandeliers and the ornate carving around its doors, the main prayer hall is much more austere than during its Christian and Jewish phases. A Hebrew plaque outside one of the upstairs classrooms, now used by the *madrassa* (Islamic school), is the only reminder of the Jewish occupants. Next door is the Bangladesh Welfare Association.

The Bangladeshis are neither white nor Christian. They have been blamed for stealing jobs, for having bad habits, and for living off the state. Compared with other immigrants, they have rarely married outside the community and have stuck together geographically, suffering severe poverty and unemployment. The world, however, has come to them. Because the area's poverty has inhibited redevelopment, the streets around the mosque now comprise one of the best-preserved Georgian enclaves in London. This architectural time warp has attracted well-heeled artists and yuppies, and some of the old silk-weavers' lofts are now pricey apartments. Brick Lane has become a museum, a ghetto of urban living, a photographer's paradise. Young women in skimpy outfits weave in and out of groups of old men with prayer beads and long beards. If those women are white, black, or Chinese, no one minds. But if it is one of them, like Monica Ali, then it's another matter altogether.

Leicester, in the British Midlands. Picture yourself on a Grey morning in an alien land, with the sky overcast and the rain falling silently, as you emerge bleary-eyed, holding a suitcase in one hand, a precious British passport in the other hand. You have left behind a warm, tropical city called Kampala, with its lush countryside and brilliant sun. You have also left behind everything your family owned after building a business over two generations. It isn't easy being robbed of all possessions, being kicked out of one country and landing on another shore, the passport being the sole, tenuous link.

The British officials are sour and the bureaucrats are cheerless, letting you in reluctantly. They give you ham sandwiches, unaware that you might be a

Muslim, or a chaste vegetarian Hindu or Jain. And they tell you not to go to Leicester. "There are no jobs there, no houses either. We cannot help you if you go to Leicester." They fear the hordes of other Asians that will follow you from the woodwork of former colonies, flashing British passports, turning up at the doorstep of a once-mighty colonial empire, seeking equal status as citizens. The mood is sullen: the empire has shrunk; the Jewel in the Crown, India, is gone; the Suez debacle has humiliated Britain; and African colonies are becoming independent, one-by-one.

Jafar Kapasi was one of some 30 000 Asians who left Uganda for Stansted Airport in November, 1972. He had £55 in his pocket, the sum total of his remaining wealth, but he also had fierce determination. Uganda had been his home; India was where his parents came from, and the British passport was going to be the key with which he would unlock his potential and create a new, even better life for his children than that which he had enjoyed in Uganda.

His nightmare had begun with a coup which brought General Idi Amin to power in Uganda. Within months Amin began berating Indians: "You came to build the railways for the British. The British have gone. Now you, too, must go, and leave behind the wealth you have milked from Uganda." Indians did control almost all business in Uganda in those days. Amin saw Indians as parasites prospering while Africans toiled; he called them "bloodsuckers". In August 1972 Amin informed Indians they had 90 days to leave the country. There were over 80 000 of them, and surely the general must have been joking, many thought in their clubs and gymkhanas, over tea and *kanda-na-bhajias* (onion bhaji).

To be sure, Indians did keep to themselves. Few married Africans and many were cunning traders, of the kind that emerge in Paul Theroux's early novel, *Fong and the Indians*. As Amin's deadline neared, their treatment worsened; some sold their property at distress prices, others found their businesses confiscated. Many were robbed on their way to the airport. Kapasi and his family left their home, daring roadblocks to get to Entebbe Airport. Abandoning everything but what they could fit into a van, they trundled towards Kampala, being looted by Ugandan soldiers at every stop. They managed to get to the airport alive only because an officer who used to shop at their store helped them. Kapasi refuses to forget what he had been through, but says: "I was determined to get back the high standard of living that we had lost. It provided me with the motivation to succeed."

It is important for such experiences not to be forgotten because nostalgia can perform its familiar trick of allowing us to remember the past, but not the pain. For example, in 2002, as Britain celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the arrival of British Asians in the UK, a collective amnesia seemed to grip the country. Edward Heath's Conservative Government got the credit for opening the door for the British Asians when nobody would accept them. But declassified cabinet papers show that Britain tried hard to fob them off elsewhere. India was a natural option, but it was the first to refuse, reminding Britain correctly that the Ugandan Asians had British passports and pointing out that the poor country was already burdened with refugees from East Pakistan, which had become Bangladesh less than a year ago. Heath then considered sending them to an island, maybe Solomon Islands in the Pacific, or even the Falklands Islands, but in the end allowed them into Britain.

Leicester officials were alarmed when they heard that Asians wanted to come to their city. At the time, the city was in decline, with businesses closing and

services stretched. Leicester City Council placed ads in Ugandan newspapers warning Indians: "In your own interests and those of your family you should accept the advice of the Uganda Settlement Board and not come to Leicester." "Bloody foreigners", Leicester's leaders must have thought, presaging arguments about "bogus asylum seekers" today. Indians would be scroungers who wanted benefits without contributing to the State, they assumed.

Worries about the welfare implications of an Asian exodus to Britain found an echo at the highest levels. In 1974, after Labour returned to power, Harold Wilson's government feared further immigration from Kenya, where President Jomo Kenyatta had passed a law requiring foreigners to have work permits. Anticipating another influx, Home Secretary James Callaghan changed the laws, effectively ending the freedom of entry of Asians, but not the white settlers, from East Africa. Even after acknowledging that the idea of creating a new class of citizenship and restricting the right of some British citizens to settle in Britain would run counter not only to international legal standards, but also to a liberal, inclusive ideology which Labour claimed to possess, the cabinet went ahead; the distinction it was drawing up between two classes of British nationals was geographical, not racial, so the government claimed.

Recounting a declassified memo in an article in the *New Statesman*,⁵ Mark Lattimer reveals Callaghan, noting: "It is sometimes argued that we can take a less serious view of the scale of immigration and settlement in this country because it could be more than offset by total emigration. This view overlooks the important point that emigration is largely by white persons [...] while immigration and settlement are largely by coloured persons. The exchange, thus, aggravates rather than alleviates the problem. When we decided to legislate to slow down Asian immigration from East Africa, we took our stand partly on the ground that a sudden influx of this kind [...] imposed an intolerable strain on the social services." Today's tabloids would not only approve such a message, they'd find a pithier way of saying it.

Callaghan's legislative changes came on top of the thunderous "rivers of blood" speech that Enoch Powell made in Birmingham in the late 1960s, in which he warned of the kind of bloody warfare that lay ahead if citizens of former colonies were allowed into Britain without any control. What had been deemed a fringe view was now becoming government policy. Graffiti such as "wogs go home", and abbreviations like "KBW" (Keep Britain White) began sprouting like weeds in an unattended backyard in summer. Columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, who was a child when she arrived from Uganda, told the BBC in 2005 how she remembered "people standing at airports with placards telling us to 'go back to where you came from'."

Today Kapasi can afford to laugh at this as a bad dream. Much has changed in his life. Not only is he a leading financial consultant, he is also a proud recipient of an OBE, runs local charities, and is regarded as a community leader. And the community has grown, in size and wealth. To understand Indian wealth in Leicester, step out of Kapasi's office and turn right, heading for Belgrave Road, once marked for demolition, but today known as "Leicester's Golden Mile". Formerly a motley collection of run-down buildings, today Asian business presence has transformed the place. The Diwali celebrations in Leicester, heralding the Hindu New Year, are believed to be the biggest outside India. Today, it is said that more jewellery is sold in Belgrave Road than anywhere else in Europe.

Belgrave Road is the high street of Indian Leicester, and Leicester is the most Indian city in Britain. By 2011, it is predicted, the majority of Leicester's population will be of Asian origin, making Leicester the first city of its size where the white community will be a minority. In a dramatic reversal, Leicester is not alarmed, but celebrates it. In 2005, the City Council apologized for the advertisements it had placed in Ugandan newspapers in 1972 urging Indians not to move to Leicester. Ross Wilmot, the leader of the city council, told the BBC: "It was clearly a mistake. Of course there are people in our society who still have very strong, negative, and racist views. But I know in Leicester the experience of living in a multicultural city has helped educate people to live together in peace and harmony." Today, Indians are as important to Leicester as the Jews, fleeing Tsarist pogroms, were to Manchester, or the Huguenots, fleeing French Catholic vengeance, were to Spitalfields.

The writer Nathan Franklin, who grew up in Leicester, noted recently: "In the 1970s and 1980s, Leicester suffered the same decline as any number of post-industrial towns in the Midlands and the north of England. But whereas other towns become more alike in success, their progress counted in branches of McDonald's and Gap, each declines in its own way. Partly because the recovery of the city and its satellite estates is not quite complete, Leicester's individuality remains palpable."

"Jai Shri Krishna", Leicester's Gujaratis greet each other, as they go about buying clothes and foodstuff in this perpetual oriental bazaar, stepping into Mirch Masala restaurant for a Jain bhel (no onions, garlic, or potatoes), buy audiotapes from Jeram Music Centre, drown sorrows in Club Mumbai Blues, and try out *salwar-kameez* outfits at the trendy shop Indi-Kal. Many of these shops are owned and run by Ugandan- or Kenyan-Indians. Arriving with nothing, they quickly set about trying to rebuild the luxurious lives they had lived in East Africa. "They never seem to retire," says Professor Richard Bonney of Leicester University, who has studied the community.

It is easy to find Ugandan Asian success stories elsewhere as well. In politics Shailesh Vara is now vice-chairman of the Conservative Party while Lata Patel was Mayor of Brent. Asif Din was an accomplished Warwickshire cricketer, while Tarique Ghaffur is the deputy assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. Manubhai Madhvani's business empire, with its interests in sugar, brewing, and tourism, is estimated at \$245 million.

Today, Indians account for some 25 per cent of Leicester's population, and 15 of the 56 councillors are Asians. The community's success has not aroused resentment or envy, but there are some rumblings. Internally, community elders complain about rising divorce rates. Over snacks at a restaurant, several of the old men complained of "our girls" wanting to marry boys they meet in pubs. One man complains that he saw somebody's daughter hugging and kissing "a foreigner" (which could mean a Muslim, a black, or a white) at a bus stop in broad daylight. While the City Council has embraced the Diwali celebrations, and pays for *dandiya ras*, a folk dance performed with sticks, the city's non-discriminatory policies mean Leicester's Hindus cannot prohibit others, particularly Muslims, from participating. "Then those boys meet our girls, and trouble starts," one man laments. Another man recounts how he saw an Indian teenager smoking, and asked him not to smoke. "Mind your own business", the teenager shot back. "Even Idi Amin was better. He only took away our assets. This country is taking away our children!" he sighs.

A few years ago, one peculiar issue galvanized some Indians into action. Many Hindus feel strongly about their right to immerse the ashes of their dead relatives in the river around Leicester, an Avon tributary. Britain allows such immersions in three rivers, and Leicester's Asians wanted to add a fourth. Ramnik Kavia, Leicester's Lord Mayor from 2003–2004, the third Asian to hold that august office in its 300–year history, was exasperated: "There are alternatives available, such as sending the ashes to India, where a priest will perform the proper ceremony in the holy Ganga. What is the need for insisting upon doing it here?" Pravin Ruparelia of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, a voluntary Hindu organization affiliated to the controversial Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Voluntary Force) of India, agreed. "Hindus need to emerge from this blind faith over rituals. Is the immersion of ashes really the most important issue affecting Hindus?"

A more important issue affecting all Asians is the glass ceiling. While many admirers praise Asian entrepreneurs and point out how Indian–owned corner shops, Bangladeshi restaurants, and Indian–owned pharmacies have transformed British retail industry, Shailesh Solanki, executive editor of *Garvi Gujarat*, points out: "Asians are successful in these businesses not because they have a special aptitude for it, but because they found it difficult to succeed in mainstream companies." At a discussion forum organized by the Centre for Social Markets in Leicester, one entrepreneur describes how he was persistently overlooked for promotions by a blue–chip British company, which kept sending him on training courses instead. "I got fed up improving my qualifications, as though I was perpetually the one requiring training."

British Asians look at the astonishing success of Indian professionals in the United States, where Indian–Americans run many of America's top corporate icons. Rajat Gupta runs McKinsey and Co., Vinod Khosla co–founded Sun Microsystems, Victor Menezis is one of the seniormost executives at Citicorp, Arun Netravali heads Bell Labs, Fareed Zakaria edits *Newsweek*, and Indra Nooyi is President of Pepsi, the highest–ranked Indian woman executive in the US. There aren't any similar Asian corporate achievers in the UK among similar, iconic British companies.

The result: many Indians have set up their own businesses. And now, some have formed the British Asian Uganda Trust, which raises money for British charities. The trust's logo shows an hourglass in which the Ugandan flag turns into the Union Jack. Madhvani, who chairs the trust, said: "We came here 25 years ago full of anxiety in an unknown land. The British people extended a welcoming hand, enabling us to make this country our home. Very few people tend to say thank you. We intend to be different." Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has also appealed to the Asians to consider investing in Uganda. "Amin was wrong; don't punish your home," he said in an emotional speech at the impressive Swaminarayana Temple in Neasden a few years ago. "You may not forget what happened, but can you forgive?" Museveni asked plaintively.

After the riots in the north of England in 2001, which engulfed Burnley, Oldham, and Bradford, many analysts feared Leicester might be next. Disaffected and jobless Asian youths had gone on a rampage targeting white areas; white youth, in turn, tried tormenting Asians. It was a long, hot summer. The British National Party put up candidates in the troubled cities and won some support, including a handful of seats. The Leicester Council has commissioned a study to identify the city's strengths that have prevented such violence in Leicester. According to Kavia, Leicester's dynamism will prevent the situation from turning ugly. "The BNP won't have a leg to stand on if it

comes here," he said. "They thrive in depressed areas, and Leicester is not depressed. There is another element, too, one that is too politically incorrect to state.

Unlike Bradford and Burnley, the majority of Leicester's Asians are not Kashmiris, Bangladeshis, or Pakistanis, but Indians. And while there are Muslims among the Indians, many of them are from the Gujarati community of Bohras, who are traders first and foremost. Disaggregating the Asian community in this manner may run counter to multicultural clichés about communities, but it helps identify and clarify issues. As Britain becomes a more multicultural society, and that multiculturalism spreads beyond the M25 to other parts of the country, clearer understanding of communities is vital. To achieve that, multiculturalism will have to be divorced from political correctness. It is nobody's case, except paranoid rightwingers who still fear Powellian rivers of blood, that migration is fundamentally bad for Britain. Societies which remain open to migrants — the United States is the foremost example, but also others like Canada, Australia, and Singapore, have relatively open borders — are able to maintain a dynamism that makes other societies appear sclerotic. The success of the Ugandan Asians in overcoming the catastrophic consequences of expulsion is the soundest argument against restrictions on immigration. Asians from East Africa proved that, far from being a drain on the resources of host countries, immigrants often become creators of wealth and employment. This is a lesson the US learned more than two centuries ago.

Australian born and bred Patricia Hewitt, a minister in the Blair cabinet and MP for Leicester West, wrote in 2005: "We should remember that our diversity brings not only cultural richness, but also economic and competitive advantage. In this global economy, the globe is at home in Britain. The new generation of British Asian, Caribbean, and African professionals and entrepreneurs not only grow businesses here, they also create trade and investment links abroad." Britain took about 30 000 immigrants from East Africa. In Leicester, which once so opposed the arrival of the Asians, an estimated 30 000 jobs have been created through the rise of Ugandan Asian businesses. The debt, then, has been repaid.



This article is based on a contribution to the panel discussion "Parallel lives. Cultural diversity and inequality in the urban space", which took place at the 19th European Meeting of Cultural Journals in London, 27–30 October 2006.

¹ See: <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1827524,00.html>

² See: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1834801,00.html>

³ *The Economist*, "Changing shadows. The many mansions in one east London house of God", 18 December 2003.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mark Lattimer, "When labour played the racist card", *New Statesman*, 22 January 1999, www.newstatesman.com/199901220021

Published 2007-04-06

Original in English

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