

The South Asian Diaspora

A Missed Opportunity?



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Introduction

South Asians¹ have always been on the move. Buddhist and Hindu missionaries carried their message in all directions in early centuries and the whole South East Asian region was influenced by Indian trade, culture and religion. Much later, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Indians spread through the British Empire, to work on plantations, to build railways or to trade, particularly in East Africa.

In the early post-war years there were new waves of migration, resulting partly from the violence of India's partition, partly from the need for workers in countries like Britain. They came directly from India or the new nation of Pakistan (including what later became Bangladesh). The expulsion of the East African Asians in the early 1970s brought another large group of entrepreneurs and professionals to Britain. Civil strife in Sri Lanka was responsible for a steady stream of refugees from the mid 1980s. By 2000 the South Asian population was around 1.8 million. The early years of the 21st century have seen significant numbers of professionals arriving, as the UK government has sought to meet demand in the healthcare and IT sectors. Today the South Asian population in the UK is somewhere above 2 million, around 4% of the total population (exact figures are impossible to obtain).

South Asian Population in the UK

(based on the 2001 census)

Indians	1,053,411	1.8%
Pakistanis	747,285	1.3%
Bangladeshis	283,063	0.5%
Other Asian – not Chinese	247,664	0.4%
Tamils (Sri Lankan & Indian)	100,000	0.18%]

The British Asian² scene

Today the British Asian scene has been transformed. Those who arrived in the UK with little more than the clothes they were wearing are well established and prominent in business, professional life and the media. TV programmes like *Goodness Gracious Me!* and films like *Bend it like Beckham* have propelled Asians into the mainstream. Asian music is increasingly popular, while 'Indian' food³ is still the nation's favourite.

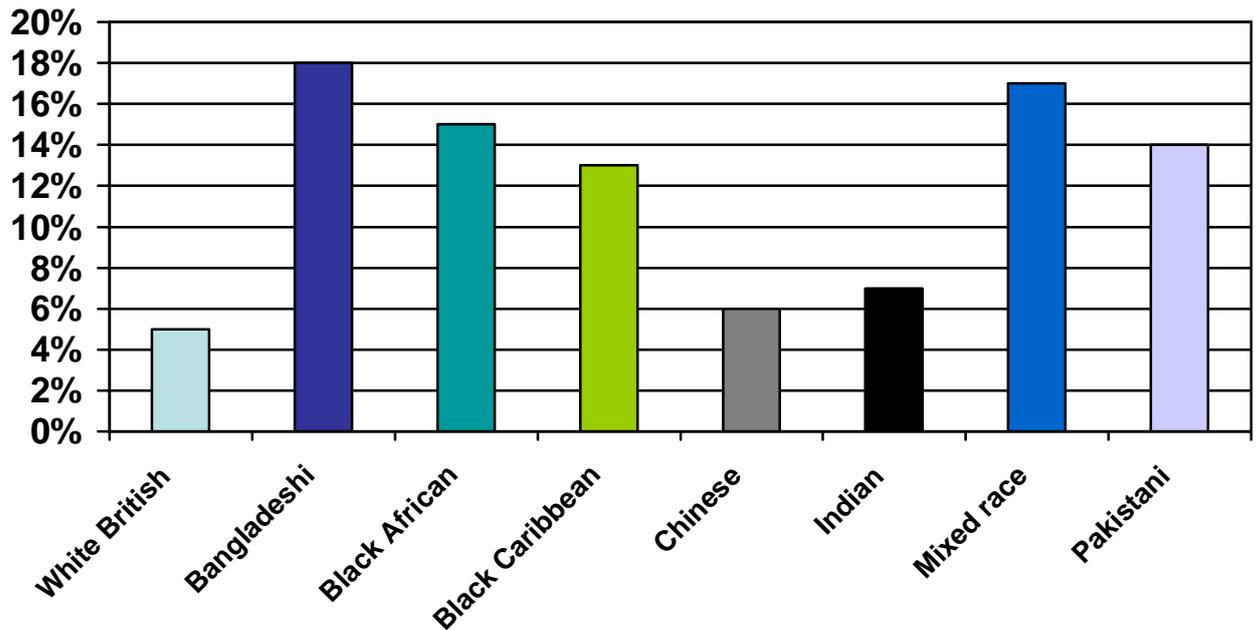
Diversity

But the use of blanket terms like Asian or South Asian should not distract us from the great diversity among the South Asian communities. The most obvious differences are *geographical* and *linguistic*. South Asians in Britain are predominantly Punjabi (from both India and Pakistan, Muslim, Sikh or Hindu), Gujarati (from E Africa or direct from India,

mostly Hindu), Bangladeshi, or Tamil (mostly from Sri Lanka). There are wide differences of language, food and clothing, along with the deep underlying similarities.

While almost all South Asians are concerned for the *education* of their children, there are large differences in *employment* rates, with Indians near the national average, while Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities are significantly worse off. These two communities also have a much *younger profile*, with around 35% under 16, compared to the Indian communities (22%) and the white communities' average of 19%).

Comparative unemployment rates



Religion is another obvious difference. 92% of Bangladeshis & Pakistanis are Muslim, while Indians in Britain are more diverse religiously:

- 45% Hindu
- 30% Sikh
- 12% Muslim
- 5% Christian

South Asians have a strong sense of community. But sometimes this can be exclusive and it is difficult to relate to people of another group, increasingly other faith communities. 9/11, and then 7/7, changed a lot for British south Asians. For some it meant there was no alternative to radical Islam. For others it opened up old wounds and divisions. Many Hindus today do not want to be called 'South Asian' or 'Asian' as they do not want to be identified with terrorists - or by implication with their predominantly Muslim communities.

Identity

Identity is still the number one issue for young British South Asians.

Dipu is a management consultant. She's 26, intelligent, successful, travelling on six continents. She has a smart flat in Fulham, and a steady boyfriend. Not the sort of person you would associate with problems. But when it comes to identity she says :

*"My parents don't have a problem. They came to this country 30 years ago. They know where they came from and why they are here. I was brought up here; I'm English all the way through - my education, thinking, attitudes. But when I meet people their first question is "where do you come from?" Just because my face is a different colour. Where do I come from? I don't belong in India. I thought I did belong here..."*⁴

Identity is linked with *family*, which can be a source both of strength and cohesion but also of tension between generations. This is often expressed in connection with arrangements for marriage (not necessarily the same as 'arranged marriage'!) Where the parents' and young people's expectations coincide, things work well, ranging from a traditional arranged marriage to one where the young people have complete freedom to make their own choice. Where expectations do not match, there is tension, even sometimes violence, as seen in forced marriages, or so-called 'honour killings', which are often linked to relationships between people of different faith communities.

The alienation between generations was starkly expressed in the riots in cities like Oldham and Bradford, and even more in the 7/7 bombings. Here the issues were not just generational but also linked with identity and citizenship. 'What does it mean to be British? Do I want to have that identity? Even if I do, there may be others who want to exclude me'. *Racism* is also a part of every South Asian's experience, whether it is a subtle 'glass ceiling' or more overt and physical.

Christian faith?

Many are attracted to the person of Christ. There is great openness to the Gospel when it is seen as relevant to Asian culture. Many are looking for some kind of synthesis that combines what they see as the best in all faiths, without excluding any. In today's climate of pressure for community cohesion, many - even Muslims - are happy to acknowledge the Christian faith and even include aspects of it in their own.

But it is a different story to become a 'Christian and part of the 'church'. The 'church' and 'Christian' are seen as a different community, part of 'Western' culture, with all its positive and negative connotations.

South Asian Christians

South Asian Christians are a 'minority within a minority'. Figures are difficult to come by. Estimates are usually between 35-50,000, but this is simply an estimate and research is needed to establish more accurate numbers.

The largest number of Protestant Christians are Punjabi, from both India and Pakistan. Many are part of 'Asian Christian Fellowships' meeting separately, sometimes on Sunday afternoons so as not to clash with 'church', and worshipping in Urdu/Punjabi languages, with traditional music and styles. There are hardly any Gujarati fellowships of this kind, but an increasing number of Tamil churches. More recently the presence of newly arrived professionals from South India has meant an increase in Malayalam churches and fellowships. Some professionals, especially those who do not live in a strongly South Asian

area, may be part of local churches from the host community, usually in twos or threes. Roman Catholic groups are mostly from Goa and more recently from Sri Lanka or South India.

Apart from the Tamil churches, the vast majority in these fellowships and churches are from a Christian background. The Tamil churches have found an openness among their fellow country people, and there are significant numbers of first generation followers of Christ. But apart from these, those South Asians who have become followers of Christ from a Hindu, Muslim or Sikh background have done so as individuals and may find difficulty in remaining within their community.

Effective evangelism approaches?

What is the way forward in reaching the large numbers of South Asians in Britain? The following paragraphs from a recent publication⁵ are still accurate:

Effective evangelism approaches among the South Asian Diaspora communities hardly exist. By and large the host country churches have found it difficult to relate to people of a different culture and established faith and have either given up or left them alone. Work with young people, for example bible clubs, has been fruitful in a number of countries. Several of today's leaders came to Christ as school or university students. However, for the vast majority of South Asians, Christianity is seen as essentially a part of western culture. Jesus (however greatly they respect him) is the god of white and black people. Effective approaches will require:

- Conviction that Jesus is Saviour and Lord for people of every culture and race, including South Asians from Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Muslim, Sikh or any other faith background
- Willingness to build bridges of friendship and trust through loving service, sharing common concerns and personal relationships. This is necessary to overcome barriers of suspicion or fear (for example with Muslim communities) and to get behind the misperceptions of 'Christianity' and focus on following Christ rather than becoming a 'Christian'
- Commitment to allow people to follow Christ within their culture and community. This will include awareness of family and community, rather than just individuals. It will be sensitive to forms of worship and religious language. It will consciously seek to develop new forms of church in which people can follow Christ in a way that is open to other members of their community, rather than separating them off. These forms will of course vary greatly.

The number of churches and groups doing this are still a handful. But there is growing evidence that their approach is beginning to bear fruit and will multiply in the next ten years.

The reasons for this lack of response are largely cultural. As already noted, most Asians have a high regard for Jesus. But they may have very negative perceptions of Christianity:

- It can be seen as essentially the same as Western culture. In Asian culture, religion, culture and community are tightly linked. You are born into your community and therefore into your culture and religion.
- Christianity is regarded as a religion in which there is freedom, but probably too much freedom, which leads to permissiveness. Whatever some Asians see of Western culture in the media they assume to be Christian. They want what is good in Western culture while retaining their own cultural identity.

- Hindus and Sikhs see all religions as essentially the same – different ways to God. So leaving your religion/community is unnecessary and wrong.

When people speak about “*becoming a Christian*” or “*coming to church*” Asians may hear them saying “*become Western*” or “*join our community*”.

Ram Gidoomal’s experience as a new follower of Christ could be echoed by many:

“I still remember the awkwardness of my first visit to church - the looking back, nervous, worried about what my friends and family would say. Would they disown me?

Was I betraying my community and culture, by going to what we saw as a Western institution - because for many of us, Jesus Christ was the white man’s God. I even pictured him as a city gent, complete with pin-striped suit and bowler hat!

I had become a follower of Christ during my third year reading Physics at Imperial College, London. Although I had been a Christian for several months, I still had not been to a church service. Coming from a Hindu background, I was not sure which church I should go to. Had I become a Protestant or a Catholic? Or a Baptist? Or an Anglican?

It was some months later that I was invited to a worship service in a church. My first instinct when I entered the church building was to remove my shoes, as I had always done before entering a holy place - but everybody else was keeping their shoes on. Then I saw a carpeted area - perfect for sitting on to worship God. I headed towards it, but was directed to wooden pews which were most uncomfortable. And then to top it all, the organ started playing - and I thought, “My goodness, who’s died?” because I associated the organ with funerals. I struggled through the service until the sermon was preached - I was hooked. I came back week after week, just to hear the sermon and suffering through the other bits, but I would make sure to leave without talking to anybody.⁶

Along with this, some Asians may have had **bad experiences of racism**. Many may be quite content to remain **within their own community**.

At the same time Asians may be experiencing considerable tension and looking for answers. If our aim is for them to see that Christ can be the answer, then clearly there is a need for new approaches. These could be summarised as:

Building bridges

It is important to take the time and trouble to build bridges of friendship and relationship. This is both an expression of service and a step towards building relationships of trust. In other words it is a mark of our love, as well as justice. It generally involves finding common concerns that are relevant to all communities, and working together, for example in projects relating to young people or discrimination, racism, leisure activities and so on. It requires time to get to know people and get behind the stereotypes.

Fresh expressions of church

We need to find ways of working with families and groups rather than only individuals, and encouraging people to remain within their community culture when they follow Christ. One example is among a group of Gujarati Hindus who meet for a weekly *satsang* or *bhajan* group (*satsang* is a common form of group that meets for singing, prayer or discussion of religious topics). This group is called ‘*Isu satsang*’ because its focus is on *Isu* or Jesus. They sit on the floor, sing and pray in Gujarati. Over several years a number have become followers of Christ but they do not consider themselves ‘Christians’. They know that

Christians are generally white (or black) people who go to churches and sit on benches and they do not want to be that. Within their local Gujarati community, which is strongly opposed to 'Christian' culture and ways, and would not want its young people to identify with them, they are accepted, though not without initial suspicions that they were going to be 'converted'.

Such an approach opens up new possibilities. But it also raises questions. Where are the boundaries? What about baptism and communion? What symbols are appropriate? What about teaching from the Bible? (they study and teach the Bible in the group) Also, this model is highly contextualised on a certain type of Gujarati community. It is relevant to them, but only to them. How do you balance this with the truth of the unity and equality of all believers in Christ?

But there is no question that fresh approaches like this are needed. A good question to ask is '*When people come to Christ, what do you want them to become, culturally?*' The answers could range from '*White British*' to '*Black British*' to '*South Asian Islamic or Hindu*' to...?

Reaching British South Asians for Christ - is it a missed opportunity? The task sometimes seems impossibly large. So little appears to have been done. But there are signs that the churches are beginning to realise the challenge and opportunity. A growing number are willing to try fresh approaches and make use of resources from specialist organisations.⁷

Further resources

Resources are available from organisations in the Faith to Faith network (0121 633 8860, office@faithtofaith.org.uk) and from South Asian Concern (020 8770 9717, info@southasianconcern.org). Below is a list of South Asian Concern resources.



Belonging, Believing, Behaving

British Asian Discipleship in the 21st Century

What does it mean to be an Asian disciple of Jesus in Britain today? Material from the July 2000 Jewels in His Crown conference. £3.00

The British and How to Deal with Them:

Doing business with Britain's ethnic minorities

Ram Gidoomal, Deepak Mahtani & David Porter

A fascinating overview of UK ethnic minority business communities, with practical suggestions for further integration whilst preserving the unique qualities of the various communities. £16.99

Catalyst for Change: the South Asian Diaspora

Over 20 million South Asians live outside South Asia. This includes reports, stories and creative ideas to help the church understand and relate to this significant group. £3.00

Changing India: insights from the margin

Robin Thomson

Stories of people who are contributing to India's transformation.

"...well worth a read since it discusses carefully the all important and hotly pursued issue of the day in religious circles – conversion."

Bimal Krishna Das, National Council of Hindu Temples, UK £4.99 paperback, £8.00 hardback

Chapatis for Tea: Reaching Your Hindu Neighbour - A Practical Guide

Margaret Wardell & Ram Gidoomal

"It is the best book I have read for sharing the Gospel with the Hindu community." Vijay Menon £4.99

Good News for Asians in Britain

Sally J Sutcliffe (Editor)

Grove Booklet explaining how Jesus is Good News for Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims with contributions from those involved in ministry. £2.95

Lions, Princesses and Gurus

Ram Gidoomal & Margaret Wardell

Helpful to those who want to reach out in friendship to Sikhs, providing information on their spiritual heritage. £5.99

Looking for Directions: towards an Asian spirituality

Asks some of life's 'big' questions and offers a perspective, taking into account the concerns that young Diaspora Asians may have, but allows the reader to form their own judgement and response. £5.00

The New People Next Door

The 20th and 21st centuries have seen unprecedented movements of peoples, creating new and often intense challenges. This report from the 2004 Forum on World Evangelism combines analysis, Biblical principles, case studies and recommendations for creative involvement. £3.50

Sari 'n' Chips

Ram Gidoomal with Mike Fearon

This underground best-seller reveals the social issues of the British Asian community. £3.99

Sri Guru Granth Sahib Discovered (Hardback)

Hakim Singh Rahi

A reference book of quotations, for those who want to learn what the Sikh scriptures say about important religious topics. (hardback) £15.00

The UK Maharajahs (Hardback)

Ram Gidoomal

Looks at the Asians behind the tiger economy in Britain, one of fast and accelerating growth. Who are they? What's the secret of their success? £15.00

A Way of Life: Introducing Hinduism

Ram Gidoomal & Robin Thomson

An introduction to Hinduism as it is practised today - both in India and the Diaspora, concluding with Christian reflection on the issues raised. £6.99

Lion Handbooks - available in English and various Asian languages (£2.00 each):

Discovering Prayer: Gujarati / Hindi / Punjabi

Real Life Christianity: English / Hindi / Punjabi

User's Guide to the Bible: English / Hindi / Punjabi

What Christians Believe: English / Punjabi

Vishal Mangalwadi books:

Astrology £1.50

In Search of Self £4.00

Missionary Conspiracy £9.95

The World of Gurus £5.99



Aaraadhanaa Ho (We Worship You) Worship Resource Pack

Double CD: 22 songs in Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Tamil & English

Lyrics Booklet: lyrics from *Aaraadhanaa Ho CD* and *Celebrating Together CD* in English, Roman and Asian scripts.

BONUS files on CDs let you print lyrics from your computer. £12.00

Extra Lyric Booklets £2.00 each

Celebrating Together CD

Praise and worship music reflecting the rich mix of Eastern and Western traditions. In English, Gujarati, Hindi, Malayalam, Punjabi, Tamil & Urdu £5.00

Worship Resource Pack and Celebrating Together CD £15.00

Deep Jalé CD - Aradhna

A collection of Indian Christian *bhajans* sung in Hindi by Chris Hale. A fusion of Eastern sitar and tabla with Western guitar and drums, it is the perfect antidote to stressful Western lives. £10.00

Marga Darshan CD - Aradhna

In a similar style to *Deep Jalé*, *Marga Darshan's* soothing tones and beautiful melodies will greatly inspire your worship. £10.00

Naam Leo Re CD — An early album from Chris Hale £10.00

Satsang — A live recording of Aradhna in concert in Southampton, England from 2003. £10.00

Who'z d'Way CD - Raj Kaul

A mix of bhangra, garage, dance, hip hop, Indian vocals & rap. £5.00

Gujarati Songbooks

Gujarati £2.50, Gujarati & English £3.99

Worship cassettes in Gujarati, Punjabi & Urdu

Prices from £3.00 each. Ask us for details



Asian Equip: Towards Understanding Hindus / Muslims / Sikhs

£12.99 each or £35 for set, each includes a workbook

If You Sikh £8.99

Love Thy Neighbour Tackles issues faced in outreach to Asians £8.99

Mixed Blessings Highlights issues that young British Asians face £8.99



Masala Groups provide an opportunity to serve the Asian community through groups which help people to come together across some of the barriers, to build bridges of friendship and to discuss matters of common concern.

BridgeBuilders £20.00 (Introductory discount for church groups £10.00)

Discussion resource material on topics of common concern, including extracts from novels, plays, films and newspaper articles. Can be used in a variety of settings, from informal groups to schools. Up to 10 copies can be made of extracts, unlimited copies of all other sections.

Discovery Groups: Series A & Series B £10.00 each

For those who want to find out more about the Christian faith and discover what the Bible teaches. Especially designed for the South Asian context. Unlimited photocopying.

Now available on CD: Series A and B £7.50 for both

pdf format, so you can print them or email them to your friends



EAST+WEST / Asian Equip

A workbook that is a user-friendly, practical resource to help churches understand how to reach out to their local South Asian community. Many have attended these popular courses.

Trainers Manual £12.00

Student Workbook £3.00



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*Please add postage and packing (normally 15% for UK orders (20% for hardback books) – min £1, max £10, for rest of Europe 20% + £1, for rest of world 30% + £2, unless otherwise indicated).
Cheques payable to South Asian Concern.*

Notes:

¹ South Asia refers to the countries of the Indian sub-continent. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), established in 1985 as an economic and political organisation, includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. (Afghanistan was included in November 2005. Myanmar (Burma) has close ties with the region, as well as with its neighbours in South East Asia).

² The expression 'British Asian' has become the common term for 'South Asians', for a variety of reasons. Though it is inaccurate - particularly in view of all the other Asian countries represented in the UK - it has been included in this paragraph simply to draw attention to its use. Elsewhere in this article we will use the term 'South Asian'. NB this term has also become problematic for some - see below.

³ About 90% of 'Indian' restaurants in the UK are run by Bangladeshis - they choose to call themselves Indian because the name is obviously better known - while the flavours they use are largely Punjabi. A welcome variation has come from the more recent growth of South Indian and Sri Lankan restaurants

⁴ *Looking for Directions: Towards an Asian Spirituality*, South Asian Concern, 2006, page 135

⁵ *The New People Next Door*, Lausanne Occasional Paper 55: Issue Group on Diaspora and International Students, South Asian Concern, 2005, pages 87-88

⁶ *Looking for Directions: Towards an Asian Spirituality*, South Asian Concern, 2006, page 125

⁷ *Faith to Faith* is a network that brings together most of those involved in outreach to South Asians in Britain. Many also co-operate through *Jewels in His Crown*, a conference every two years. Recently *Christian Vision for Men*, an evangelistic organisation, has appointed a Director for Asian outreach.

Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

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