The spectre of racialisation that haunts brown Britain

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The past struggles of brown and black immigrants have brought improvement in racial equality in the United Kingdom – but recent books make clear that British liberalism's claims of substantive progress are overly optimistic.

On the face of it, Southasians in Britain have never had it this good. Lists of the country's rich regularly feature Southasian names linked to eye-wateringly large fortunes. Southasian representation in virtually every arena – from media and music to literature, sport and the arts – has become more commonplace, diverse and sophisticated, making it seem almost less remarkable as a result. Southasian cuisine is unshakeably ensconced in British gastronomy. And British politics increasingly features brown faces in the highest places. When Humza Yousaf, of Pakistani descent, became Scotland's first minister in 2023, a year after Rishi Sunak, of Indian descent, had become the United Kingdom's first Asian-origin prime minister, a meme doing the rounds on Southasian WhatsApp groups gleefully looked forward to the breakup of the United Kingdom being negotiated by a "Pakistani" and an "Indian" – a wry reference to how India and Pakistan were created from the partition of the Subcontinent at the end of British colonial rule. At the time, Yousaf's Scottish National Party was advocating a referendum on whether Scotland should remain part of the United Kingdom.

It wasn't always like this, of course. Mihir Bose's memoir *Thank You Mr. Crombie: Lessons in Guilt and Gratitude to the British* reminds us that many of these developments took place within living memory. Bose will likely be familiar to viewers of the BBC as its first sports editor, and also its first non-white editor. Born in Kolkata shortly before Partition and India's independence in 1947 – one of "midnight's children", as he describes himself – he first travelled to the United Kingdom in 1969 to study industrial engineering. His early experiences were typical of those endured by legions of mid-century black and brown immigrants: landladies refused to rent him rooms, white women baulked at the prospect of romantic relationships and colleagues warned him not to bring his "funny food" to work. Switching to a career in chartered accountancy in the hope that this would give him the space to pursue his ambition of becoming a writer, he took his first step towards his dream by persuading the newly formed London Broadcasting Corporation to allow him to become its cricket correspondent.

He established his reputation as a sports journalist by writing regularly for the *Sunday Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, but also maintained a sideline in financial reporting on property, pensions and personal finance. Combining the two fields, he carved out a distinctive niche for himself as a writer on the business of sports, convincing his editors long before this became self-evident that "it was the men in suits who often determined the world in which the men in shorts operated." In this capacity, he broke stories on corruption in football transfers, the politics of hosting bids for mega sports events, and the murky and dangerous world of cricket match-fixing and betting. Along the way, he seems to have found time to write more than fifty books on an astonishing range of subjects – including cricket, football and other sports, as well as business and Southasian history, politics and

culture.

While returning home from football matches in the 1980s, Bose was verbally abused and assaulted by white football fans on so many occasions that he contemplated abandoning football reportage. Reflecting on these experiences, he offers an acute social commentary on the racial dynamics of British football. Bose describes the Britain of the 1960s, to which he first came, as one in which the local factory, pub and football ground were all within walking distance of each other. "The supporter worked in the factory till lunchtime, then went to the pub, and just before kickoff, the football stadium. Then, after the final whistle had blown, he'd pick up the pink 'un, the evening paper selling outside the ground which carried the match reports, and walk home. There the missus would have the tea ready." Few had the ability to travel long distances to watch away matches.

By the time he started reporting on football, in the late 1970s, this world had almost completely disappeared. Now white football supporters who had become wealthy enough to live in the newly expanding suburbs travelled back into the grim inner-city areas that their parents had worked hard to leave to watch football in decrepit stadiums in neighbourhoods populated by black and brown people who had little interest in the game. He writes of joining this white "invasion" every Saturday, an incongruous brown figure entering an all-white press box in a stadium that was almost wholly white even if the teams that were playing featured, equally incongruously, some black players who were among the finest footballers in the country. Increasingly, fans also journeyed several hours to watch their teams play away from home, arriving in famously rowdy packs that had to be carefully segregated from home-team supporters and giving English football its notoriety for hooliganism. In a few strokes, Bose distils sweeping changes in postwar Britain – deindustrialisation, immigration, white flight, the arrival of the motorways and the five-day week – into an account of the changing lifeworlds of football.

Yet within the worlds of British journalism and letters, Bose's story is – with a few very notable exceptions – largely one of finding acceptance, encouragement and friendship. The bylines pile up, opening doors to ever more prestigious commissions, contacts and clubs. When an Indian president arrived in Britain on a state visit, Bose was one of 300 British Indians invited to Buckingham Palace to showcase the success of the community.

At their best, autobiographies tell more than just the story of a life; they offer, simultaneously, insightful glimpses into their subject's social worlds and times. But autobiographical narratives of accomplishment risk conflating individual experience with sociological dynamics, as if one's personal good fortune can confirm the essentially benign state of the world. Bose's book runs this risk, and he also sometimes strikes jarring notes when he shifts his gaze from the immediacy of his life to the broader political and cultural horizons within which he was and is situated. Towards the end of the book, he laments that British rule in Southasia never left behind a "cultural imprint" akin to that produced by, say, the Mughal era, with its syncretism of Hindu and Muslim cultures evident in music, the rich legacy of Urdu, and much more. This is exceedingly ironic given that many of the book's early chapters conjure up the privileged South Bombay world of the 1950s and 1960s in which he grew up, and which evidences just such an imprint – a world of English-medium schools, cinemas and libraries steeped in an Anglophone snobbery, which continued to look to Britain as the fount of civilisational superiority. Equally oddly, Bose remarks of Britain that "the fall of its non-white empire had no impact on its domestic politics." In drawing such clean dividing lines between here and there and between now and then, Bose's memoir reiterates an enduring shibboleth of British liberalism: the empire is over and all that remains is the admittedly difficult task of acknowledging it, one that the nation is grappling with surely even if slowly.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The sociologist Paul Gilroy explains racism in postwar Britain as a symptom of what he calls postcolonial melancholia – the "inability to face, never

mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the Empire and subsequent loss of imperial prestige." For many white Britons, the presence of millions of non-white people in their midst arouses longstanding fears of white decline or, in the language of the contemporary far-right, "replacement". In his meticulously researched *We're Here Because You Were There*, the historian Ian Sanjay Patel traces how this fear shaped the very definition of British citizenship.

In 1948, shortly after India, Pakistan and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) had become independent, the British Nationality Act conferred on all those who had previously been British subjects the new status of "citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies". By the stroke of a pen, all persons born in Britain, the British colonies and newly independent Commonwealth states were given the right to move to, live in, vote in and hold public office in Britain. So implausible a development does this seem to contemporary readers accustomed to a world of tightly-guarded borders and unforgiving visa regimes that Patel spells out the implications in no uncertain terms: "After 1948, a non-white person born in colonial Kenya or Jamaica had enjoyed identical citizenship, on equal terms, to Winston Churchill." One immediate provocation for the law was Canada's impending intention to define its citizenship as independent of British subjecthood. Faced with the spectre of the dissolution of its empire, Britain attempted to impose imperial unity through the modality of citizenship, in part to preserve the fiction of British leadership of a grand Commonwealth edifice, enfranchising 600 million people across the globe in the process.

Of course, in an era prior to mass air travel, British politicians did not expect that these people could or would migrate to Britain in their thousands – or at least they hoped that this would be more likely with only white settlers of British "stock" in countries like Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Kenya. Yet as "coloured" immigration gathered pace – from the Caribbean on ships like the *Empire Windrush*, whose name is now metonymic with this migration, as well as from Southasia and Africa – the now familiar complaint that non-white immigration was producing a national crisis of integration began to be aired. Even by the early 1960s, when the non-white population of Britain still stood at less than one percent, it had become an article of faith that migration needed to be regulated. In 1962, the citizenship law was amended to give only persons born in the United Kingdom or holding a UK passport an unfettered right of entry into the country, remarkably splitting the right of entry from the notion of citizenship.

One group that slipped through the net that white British politicians were trying to draw around their island nation was a sizeable number of British citizens of Southasian descent from East Africa. Having migrated across the Indian Ocean during the heyday of the British Empire as clerks, merchants and indentured labourers, many East African Asians did not or could not become citizens of the newly independent states of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. In the late 1960s, East African governments began to implement policies of "Africanisation" to regain control of economies that they regarded as being dominated by Asians, placing citizenship out of their reach and often pushing them out of business. These East African Asians remained British citizens, with passports issued by British High Commissions in these countries, and they expected their British passports to give them the option of moving to the United Kingdom. Faced with the prospect of having to admit tens of thousands of non-white people, British officials desperately sought ways to keep them out. In Kenya, where a crisis over East African Asians' status and fate first erupted in 1967, they put pressure on the government to not expel its Asian residents. In India and Pakistan, they pressured governments to admit those who were forced to leave.

In 1968, British citizenship law was changed again, this time to restrict the right of entry to the United Kingdom to only those British citizens who had been – or whose parents or grandparents had been – born, adopted, naturalised or registered as British citizens in the United Kingdom itself. Kenyan Southasians with UK passports were still British citizens, but this status did not give them

the right to enter the country, unlike white British settlers in Kenya for whom the door remained open. For the first time, British citizenship law privileged ancestral territorial connection to the mother country, establishing a political and racialised definition of belonging. Crucially, the law did not mention race – although the reference to ancestry was of course a coded way of doing so – preserving British liberalism's delusional self-understanding of itself as being committed to equality and the rule of law. Additionally, the law was justified on the grounds that it did not ban the entry of Kenyan Asians into the United Kingdom but rather regulated their numbers through a quota system.

When, in 1972, the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin provoked a similar crisis to the earlier one in Kenya by giving Ugandan Asians three months to leave his country, Britain was quicker to accept responsibility for its citizens, perhaps because the crisis was heightened by Amin's reputation for cruelty and capriciousness. But it also shrewdly framed the situation as a humanitarian and refugee emergency with a view to encouraging other countries to share the burden of accommodating Ugandan Asians, substantial numbers of whom would settle in India and Canada. Still, between 1965 and 1974, Britain would take in more than a hundred thousand East African Asians, making them one of the largest non-white groups to enter the country en masse.

Travelling from India in 1969, Bose was part of a different migration stream. Yet, as Patel's book makes clear, he too was entering a fraught terrain whose domestic racial upheavals around immigration were profoundly connected to the multiple crises occasioned by the end of the empire. So fatigued were the British by the task of dealing with these crises that in 1981 British citizenship was all but severed from any relationship to the empire. Now a British citizen was simply someone who was born in the United Kingdom and at least one of whose parents was British or had "settled" status in the country. The United Kingdom finally sutured citizenship to territory, becoming a nation-state like any other.

Once black and brown people entered the United Kingdom, they had to turn their attention to the gruelling task of building new lives in the face of unremitting white hostility. The researcher and historian Preeti Dhillon provides a lively and informative account of how they did this in *The Shoulders We Stand On: How Black and Brown people fought for change in the United Kingdom*. Written in a highly accessible and rather chatty style, the book provides snapshots of ten movements, campaigns and organisations that challenged racism in Britain between the 1960s and 1980s.

What emerges from this panoramic overview of struggles rooted in different locales and communities is a commonality of preoccupations with racism in employment, education, housing and healthcare. Perhaps the most brutal struggles described are those against police and white supremacists who often worked hand in glove as they prowled areas with large immigrant populations. The men in uniform used the law to stop and search black youth whom they would arrest and prosecute on spurious charges; the vigilantes, organised in groups such as the National Front, picked fights, campaigned against immigration and even murdered black and brown people. These battles generated a litany of milestones in British anti-racist organising – the Mangrove Nine, the Oval Four, the Bradford 12, the New Cross 13 – each name marking a place and a toll of arrest, trial, incarceration or death, and sparking mass movements that fought back by every means possible.

There are several moments in Dhillon's study when a remarkable solidarity between different racial groups shines through: in the invitation that a radical branch of the Indian Workers' Association extended to the African-American revolutionary Malcolm X in 1964, in the feminist campaigns of the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent, in the prominence of Southasian members of the British Black Panthers, and in the cross-racial labour solidarity that, unusually for the time, saw even white workers supporting the Southasian women at the forefront of the famous Grunwick strike

of 1976 to 1978.

Although Dhillon is careful to distinguish between black and brown struggles in deference to contemporary sensibilities that might bristle at their conflation, many of the Southasian activists and groups she writes about identified as black, seeing the term as signifying opposition to white supremacism regardless of one's ethnic or racial location. It is salutary to recall that politicised Southasians once overwhelmingly identified as black, notwithstanding the colourism, casteism and anti-blackness that pervades both Southasia and its diasporas. That political blackness no longer enjoys the legitimacy it once did – partly as a result of these dynamics, but also thanks to more identitarian modes of organising – attests to the impoverishment of the landscape of social movements in our own time.

This, among other reasons, makes the question of whether the movements Dhillon writes about improved prospects for social justice a complicated one. Dhillon is clear that they achieved many of their objectives – yet, as she acknowledges, no observer of contemporary Britain could possibly contend that racism has disappeared from public life. To the contrary, one might argue that a decade and a half of austerity under Conservative Party rule since 2010 has fuelled a virulent resurgence of racism. This is visible in the anti-migrant xenophobia that propelled the Brexit campaign, in the neglect of public housing that accounted for the Grenfell disaster, in which black and brown people were disproportionately affected, in the wrongful deportation of British citizens of Caribbean origin in what became known as the Windrush scandal, and in the greater vulnerability of black and brown people in the Covid-19 pandemic, to cite just a few examples. One can see the dilemma here. To claim that there has been no improvement in racial equality would be to imply that the struggles of the past have been in vain. Conversely, too optimistic an assessment gives in to British liberalism's whiggish and complacent assumptions of inexorable moral improvement.

The conventional wisdom on how British racism has changed is that it has gone from being interpersonal to institutional, administered less through the fists of a National Front thug than through the cold and impersonal decisions of bureaucratic authority. One implication of this is that racism has become subtler and more coded, harder to call out. There may not be explicit colour bars in employment and education, but the persistence of racialised pay and attainment gaps makes plain that all is not well. The term "institutional racism" acquired greater currency in Britain after it was used in 1999 by the Macpherson report to account for the failure of the Metropolitan Police to properly investigate the 1993 murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence. A cynic might point out that the fact that no police officer has ever been held to account for dereliction of duty in a case that is widely regarded as one of Scotland Yard's biggest disasters suggests that institutional racism locates responsibility in everyone and no one.

Reading the scholar Sita Balani's *Deadly and Slick: Sexual Modernity and the Making of Race*, one is overcome by the sense that to ask whether there has been progress or regress on questions of racial justice might be to pose the wrong question. Balani's book adopts a wider temporal frame than the other titles reviewed here, beginning in the colonial period and taking things right up to the present through the eras of New Labour and recent Conservative rule. Her narrative is held together by two premises. First, racialisation and race-making are naturalised and made to seem commonsensical by being embedded in sexuality. Or, to put this in another way, racial others are evaluated in terms of their distance from normative white bourgeois forms of kinship and sexuality. Second, imperial racial taxonomies continue to inform projects of race-making today.

For a small number of British officials and soldiers to rule millions in the colonies, it was imperative that the fiction of racial supremacy be maintained at all times. This required the careful management of racial boundaries, a process that drew the imperial state into such matters as the regulation of marriage, concubinage and sex work, the control of venereal disease and the proper

rearing of children. In a multitude of ways, the preservation of “racial hygiene” required the ceaseless management of sex.

When black and brown bodies entered the mother country, old colonial anxieties about miscegenation and racial purity came home to roost, making the “immigrant” family the object of state intervention in a number of ways. As Balani demonstrates with reference to contemporary state practice, groups are racialised differently in accordance with the different forms of sexuality that are attributed to them. Southasian families are seen as suffering from a surfeit of culture that makes them too patriarchal, insular and resistant to British values. Black families, conversely, are believed to have a deficit of culture as a result of absent fathers and consequently chaotic and pathological kinship structures. These different stereotypes undergird distinct forms of state intervention that intensify in moments of crisis. Indeed, the distinctive ways in which different groups are racialised and sexualised by the state and the contrasting modes of resistance that they generate do much to explain the fracturing of the category of political blackness.

Not only is black separated from brown, and both from white, but the category of “British Asian” is itself broken up, with some of its fragments assimilated into whiteness and others remaining racial outsiders. The first signs of this were evident in the “Rushdie affair” of 1988, when British Muslims protested the publication of the British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie’s allegedly blasphemous *The Satanic Verses* by publicly burning copies of the book. The consequent separation of Muslims from Hindus and Sikhs was further entrenched by the riots that tore through mainly Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities in deindustrialised towns in the north of England in 2001, as well as by the attacks on the United States of America on 11 September that year.

While the “Muslim terrorist” became the target of surveillance, detention, torture and even deportation, the upwardly mobile Indian immigrant (usually Hindu and upper-caste) provided British liberalism with an alibi by furnishing proof of its putative meritocracy. This much-celebrated figure stood in opposition to many others – the “bogus asylum seeker”, the “benefits scrounger”, the groomer, the gang member, the “jihadi bride”. Drawing on the work of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, Balani deftly demonstrates how each of these figurations indexes a moral panic, purporting to account for the social dislocation produced by neoliberal capitalism and austerity by providing a scapegoat on whom responsibility can be displaced.

By locating these figurations in longer colonial genealogies, Balani also helps us to understand how the materials with which they are constructed are readily available in British public culture. Colonial strategies of divide and rule were premised on the differential racialisation and sexualisation of different communities. “Martial races” such as Sikhs, Gurkhas and Highland Scots were conscripted for military labour. But other groups, such as the Pathans of the Northwest Frontier Province and the so-called criminal tribes and castes, were thought to have an unrestrained and subversive sexuality that was less amenable to imperial appropriation, anticipating contemporary constructions of Muslim terrorists, Asian groomers and gang members. And while the “Bengali babu” – a term initially applied to the English-educated bourgeois Bengalis who disproportionately filled the lower ranks of first the colonial bureaucracy and later the nationalist movement – was dismissed as effeminate and inconsequential, something of this figure has survived and been recuperated in the image of the nerdy and cerebral Indian knowledge worker who has become more assimilable into structures of normative kinship and citizenship.

These continuities suggest that the relationship between racialisations in successive historical conjunctures is less one of straightforward repetition than of haunting – an uncanny doubling in which things feel the same but are not quite. This casts in a different light the question of how institutional racism relates to putatively older and cruder forms of racism. One might ask what need there is for the stormtroopers of the far-right when their demands have been taken up by the

Conservative government of the day, which zealously proclaims its determination to “stop the boats” and slash immigration. And how much more effective – and perplexing – are their arguments when made by brown men and women in pinstripes and power suits: Priti Patel, Rishi Sunak, Suella Braverman and their ilk.

Among the nearly one thousand Kenyan Asians with British passports who flew to the United Kingdom in February 1968 was a man named Christie Fernandes. As the lawyer and author Sadakat Kadri has recently written on the London Review of Books blog, the timing of Fernandes’s departure was determined less by decisions of the Kenyan government than by a rumour that the British government was about to change the law to restrict immigration from across the Commonwealth except for those (overwhelmingly white) citizens who had an ancestral connection with the United Kingdom. For months, the notoriously racist Conservative MP Enoch Powell had been fulminating against the prospect of hundreds of thousands of Kenyan Asians being admitted into the country, warning that “rivers of blood” would flow through the land if this were to happen. Just over half a century later, Fernandes’s daughter, Suella Braverman, became the UK’s home secretary. One might think that her father’s experience would give Braverman some sympathy for people fleeing difficult circumstances and seeking refuge in Britain. Yet in office she proved a worthy successor to Powell, speaking of illegal immigration as constituting an “invasion” and declaring it to be her “dream” and “obsession” to send asylum seekers to Rwanda – a plan that has widely been condemned as reneging on the UK’s human-rights commitments. The more things change, the more they stay the same.△

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