

Southall Revisited

The author, visiting Southall after eight years, finds the immigrant community in Britain greatly transformed.

by MANOHAR SINGH GILL

I FIRST visited Southall in 1967. Being a former Deputy Commissioner of Jullundur, I was keen to see this new "canal colony" in the West that sent back such a steady stream of prosperous men, in shiny terylene suits, to walk the streets of our district town. The visitors swaggered about our bazars and spent money like rich Americans. To prove it, they bought land at fabulous prices in their home villages. Some came to get married and were besieged by importuning parents of eligible girls.

It was not an entirely "brave new world" that I saw. Southall had been a comfortable suburb near Heathrow airport, when the immigrants from the Punjab started arriving in the early fifties. As I was told, one reason why they chose Southall was for its nearness to Heathrow; new arrivals could easily find their way to their cousins. Southall soon became the Punjab of the Western world.

While immigrants spread to all parts of England, particularly to the industrial areas around London and the Midlands, Southall came to occupy a very special place as the core of the immigrant presence in the country.

By 1967 Southall already had a considerable Asian community. As one came to Southall Broadway, one was confronted by

a remarkable scene. While the backdrop was indubitably English—the shops, the chimneyed houses, the grey asphalt footpaths, even the lowered sky and constant drizzle—the actors who moved against this canvas were from another clime. The sidewalks in front of the shops were peopled by every hue and colour of turbans, which clashed and mingled with the many shades of the saris on young girls and the salwar-kameezs of their large-hipped matronly chaperons. White faces and skirts were the exception rather than the rule. Most of the shops were English owned, but already the odd board could be seen proclaiming Banarasi saris, Indian home provisions or jewellers. Many signboards preferred Urdu and Punjabi to English.

Indignities Suffered

The Dominion cinema owned by the Indian Workers Association was the cultural centre of the community. All week it showed Indian movies. In the foyer, it sold *samosas*, *pakorás*, *barfi* and other Indian eats. Occasionally, it arranged wrestling bouts. I remember attending one. Randhawa, one of our famous champions who was passing through, was persuaded to fight a local English stalwart. The hall was full of Indians. The poor Englishman was alone, except for his beefy second and a girl-friend. How they howled for his blood, shouting lusty abuses in Punjabi! It seemed to me that the Indian champion was their surrogate for working off many of the indignities that each man in the audience had suffered at the hands of the locals.

Like the Englishman of the 19th century, the Sikh carries his church and his bible wherever he goes. And so there is a gurd-

wara in Southall. On weekdays the old, the aged and the idle went there to attend the morning and evening services and to help in the upkeep. On Sundays, the entire community turned up to pray, to eat together in the community kitchen, to talk politics and quarrel. (The Sikh loves to have his "party" and to battle with another. Everybody deplores these quarrels in Southall and yet nobody wishes them to end. If they did, some of the fun would go out of their lives.)

Life for the immigrant was hard and drab. Most of them were illiterate or poorly educated. The worst jobs in foundries, rubber factories and the like fell to their lot. Contrary to Enoch Powell's claim, the immigrants have never been a threat to the natives' job opportunities. They only fill the gaps in the labour force, taking up what the whites reject. Motivated by an intense desire to make poverty a remote memory, they worked hard and long, sometimes even bribing the white foremen for the favour of being allowed to do overtime! To enhance their savings, many lived in overcrowded houses. Wives were either encouraged to work or neglected along with the children.

The men left early in the bitter cold mornings and came home late, tired and crushed by the intense physical labour. An hour or two at the pub (often patronised only by Asians), a cold meal left by the family too tired to wait up every night—and to bed. The wives led lonely lives. The social warmth of the Punjab was missing. The Englishman's aloofness had entered their bones.

Many had brought their aged parents from the Punjab. I have never seen more sad lives than theirs. Unable to work, deprived of the social concourse of the village *chaupai*, they sat in corners, staring out at the perpetual grey drizzle and dreaming of the sunshine and laughter of the Punjab. Most of the elderly women employed to collect garbage in the lounges at Heathrow are

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THE WHITE MAN AND KOSHER MEAT. Ten years ago, most shops were English owned, but the odd board in Urdu, Punjabi or Bengali could be seen proclaiming halal meat (left), Banarasi saris, Indian home provisions or jewellery. Over the years, the Asian community has made tremendous strides. Many have moved into trade, others into inn-keeping, yet others into manufacturing. Right: In an Indian-owned garment factory.





THE WOMEN WEAR NO BIKINIS. Not many immigrants can afford the luxury of an outing on the beach. For most, life is hard and drab. The men leave early and come home late, tired and crushed by the overtime they put in. The wives are either encouraged to work or are neglected.

Punjabis. Waiting for a flight once, I could not resist the temptation to talk to the pleasant-faced grandmother who kept passing by, collecting cigarette-stubs.

"Mataji, why do you spend your time collecting the rubbish thrown by these people? Why don't you go back to the Punjab?"

She burst out crying, clung to my coat sleeve and begged: "Please, son, take me home. Take me back to Punjab!"

I could hardly restrain my tears.

Discrimination there was—some subtle, some blatant. Four of us, all at Cambridge University, went across to the continent in a car over the Christmas break. We returned on a cold wet night. At Dover, which has thousands of bed-and-breakfast places for incoming tourists, we tried dozens of houses, but were politely told that the house was full. It seemed odd, since we were the only ones to have got off the ferry. Finally we were admitted to a place. In the morning the host, an old man who had been to India and the East during his sailing career, asked us if we had tried any other house. I answered innocently that we had, but they were all full. "No," he replied, "they were not. Only they don't take coloured people." He, of course, was proud of the fact that he did.

The first-generation immigrant, even when treated badly, was willing to accept all. The poor, he felt, have no rights. What mattered was to earn and accumulate money. Wealth bought you all the rights—and some more in the long run. But even then the youngsters, who had grown up in the UK and perhaps gone to school there, were beginning to bristle at the double standards. The percipient among the British leaders pressed for genuine equal rights.

In 1975, I went back to spend another year at Cambridge. On the flight, I sat next to a young man from Khalsa College, Jullundur, being ferried to England to marry a Punjabi Londoner. His escort sat watchful, like a mother hen, a few rows behind. Watching the morose young man, who seemed to nurse a perpetual cold, I wondered how

he was going to make out with a girl who had perhaps been brought up entirely in the West, who was as much a cockney as any Jane or Sally and who probably worked in Marks and Spencers. How would Jasbir Kaur fancy her sniffling beau from a Jullundur village? The young man, for his part, had abandoned 20 good acres in sunny Punjab for the pleasures of a factory job among the slag-heaps of the Midlands. I didn't give their marriage many marks for happiness. At Heathrow, groom and guide disappeared into the London fog and I was left speculating on the outcome of the Khalsa College man's first date with the West.

Indian Delights

Much had changed in Southall and elsewhere in the UK. Barring a few shops owned by chain stores like Marks and Spencers, nearly the whole of the Southall Broadway is Indian owned. Southall has also acquired a reputation as a bit of a gourmet place. Over the years the Indians have weaned the English away from their insipid food. Today almost all of them love the sight of a curry or a tandoori chicken. There is hardly a town without an Indian restaurant. London is full of them. Peter Sellers has been known to help promote the sales of one.

The gurdwaras continue to increase in number and flourish. As the English turn away more and more from Christianity, they have no use for the churches. Wise, commercially-minded people that they are, they sell them. And the Sikhs, practical people that they are, buy them. The One Supreme Being, whom we all worship, is thus put to the minimum of inconvenience, only having to change a somewhat phlegmatic congregation for a more enthusiastic one.

From Wales in the West to Scotland in the North, the yellow flag of the faith flies over isolated communities. It is their sole prop in a strange environment. Its value as a social and cultural aid to the people is immense. On Sundays, everyone goes to the gurdwara. It is a natural club and a focal point for community action in times of need.

For the women and children it is a glorious weekly outing. As for the Southall gurdwara, the "friendly" quarrels over its committee elections continue to provide therapeutic outlets for the surplus energies of the faithful.

In the economic and social fields the Indians have made tremendous progress in the seven years between my two visits. In 1968, most worked in factories. Now a middle class is rapidly coming up. Many have moved into trade, setting up wholesale and retail shops. Some have gone into the hotel and catering business. A few are even manufacturing. In Birmingham, I visited two dedicated young men who had set up a garment factory employing a fairly large labour force. "We are determined to become millionaires!" said one of them with typical Punjabi directness.

Socially too the Asians are on the move. On a fine August afternoon, I attended a reception at the home of a Sikh councillor in Southall. Among the guests were Cabinet Ministers, senior Civil Servants and a Lord or two. The atmosphere was happy and congenial. The immigrants have indeed come a long way from their rubber factory days.

A Vigorous Press

There is tremendous intellectual ferment among the immigrants. This is particularly true of the Punjabis. Writers' workshops have sprung up in every town and poets are singing in a new idiom of their experience in the Western world. A new Punjabi vocabulary, borrowing heavily from the English language, is being hammered out. Books are being published and magazines and weekly newspapers are being brought out. The Punjabi Press carries on vigorous, no-holds-barred controversies on all possible issues—social, cultural and political. There is no doubt that the Punjabi Press is playing the leading role in moulding the social attitudes and opinions of the immigrants.

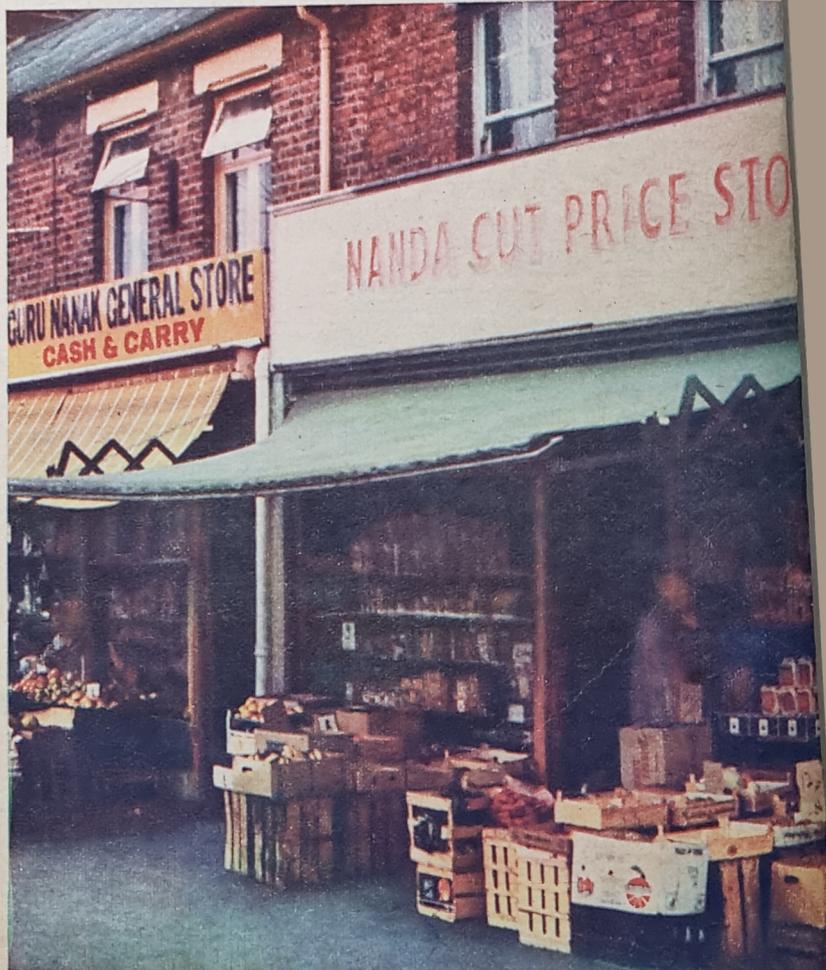
The Punjabis love song and music. Singers from the Punjab find a rich and lucrative field in England. The famous ones come tramping in every year from Lahore and Amritsar. Local talent has also come up. I remember hearing a Sikh sing nostalgically of the two Punjabs one Sunday in the Asian programme on the BBC.

When all has been said, Southall remains a complex phenomenon: a unique attempt to evolve a common culture from the experiences of the East and the West. Difficulties there are, but there are many who are anxious to make Southall a truly cosmopolitan community. This may seem an odd hope in the current situation, but I will point only to a single sign for the future. I went to see the Southall school, for that is where the future is being made. The Headmaster was English, the most popular teacher a turbaned Sikh from Amritsar. To his West Indian, English, Pakistani and Indian students, he did not seem a strange creature from an unknown world. I went to a section for new arrivals from the subcontinent. Special teachers—all English—worked with dedication to fit the newcomers into this strange new world. I asked a little Pakistani boy newly arrived from Karachi how he felt. He was happy as a bean. Why? I asked. "They don't beat you here as they do in Pakistan," he replied.

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ARE WE REALLY BROTHERS UNDER THE SKIN? The march protesting the murder of Gurdip Singh Chhagar. Subsequently an Indian doctor en route to America, an Asian bus conductor and a white youth were stabbed. Asian leaders in Britain say they have "monitored" over 1,000 racial incidents between March and June.



WATCHING DEATH GO BY. The Archbishop of Canterbury termed the racial attacks as "a disgrace to our nation". Ron Hayward, General Secretary of the ruling Labour Party, asked its members to speak out loud and clear against the forces which were trying to divide the nation on racist issues: "It is not only undemocratic, it is unclean, obscene and grossly unfair." Right: Is life also at a discount? [The pictures on these pages were taken in Southall.]