

# An Asian Agenda for British Public Policy

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## The Media: Access, Roles and Cultural Change

One of the characteristic features of the modern age lies in the ability and power of the Media - Radio, TV, Publishing - to shape public opinion. To an increasing extent, today it is not so much the views of individuals that determine our choices but how well these same individuals present their views in the Media. 30 years ago, when I set foot in this country, the image of England was of a country that, through its elected government, cared for its citizens: primarily through the Welfare State and through State Education. Today, almost a generation later, we are persuaded into believing in the primacy of the Individual over the State. A revolution in perception that has been effected through the Media, rather than at the expense of it.

This same Media, 30 years ago, offered visions of ourselves as either (a) non-English speakers - remember the BBC's *Nai Zindagi Naya Jeevan*? - or (b) non-English speakers who stumbled over the most basic English - recall ITV's *Mind Your Language*; or (c) immigrants who operated illegal rackets aimed at fellow immigrants - as in the BBC's *The Detective*. (Still by far the best TV drama involving Asians!)

Today, in the year of the comet - which the earth will not see again for another 3,000 years - what is the visual, oral and aural representation of Asians? TV has fractured into the Asian media (mainly cable & satellite) and the so-called "mainstream". In 1996, total cable & satellite audience-share rivalled that of C4 - roughly 12% of the market. I don't know of any research done into Asian viewing habits but I would estimate that, in the metropolitan areas of the country, well over 50% of the Asian market is devoted to Zee-TV, AsianNet and Namaste TV.

The story can be replicated in radio - especially in London, where Sunrise Radio has achieved a near-monopoly. Sadly, however, the same cannot be said of newspapers. The language newspapers - like *Garvi Gujarat* & *Daily Jang* - have a very small readership (and possibly an ever-decreasing one); while the English-language Asian press have an even-smaller one. Perhaps this suggests that we are not a terribly literate community. Or perhaps that the English-language Asian press simply does not fulfil a need, in the way that other branches of the media do.

In the so-called mainstream, it is interesting to note the appearance of print journalists like Vivek Choudhury, Maya Jaggi, Anita Chaudhuri, Shekhar Bhatia, Amit Roy and Kamal Ahmad. On the TV, we can take pride in Matthew Amoriliwalla, Rita Charles, Krishnan Gurusurthy, Gargi Patel, to mention just a few. And - my own particular fetish - in the whole host of Asian backroom men and women: look at the credits that roll on the screen - especially on BBC - and just see the numbers of Asians who are Production Assistants or Editors or Sound operators. A very healthy development.

But, apart from the hallowed examples of journalists, what is the screen-presence of Asians today? Not on East - a specialist "Asian" slot - but on the mainstream? Any chat-show hosts? Producers? Regular dramas? Films? Game-shows? Political commentators? Economic commentators? Cultural critics? - There's Sanjay & Geeta, of course, in East-Enders. And lots of Asian bit-part players in The Bill, London's Burning and Casualty. So, what the great non-Asian British public sees each week on TV are some well-spoken Asian-looking journalists and a shady market-stall dealer and his long-suffering wife. And of course the odd Asian in an ad for curry, as well as some arm-waving, turban- and dhoti-clad Asians in ads for British Nuclear Fuels.

What does this, admittedly sketchy, survey of contemporary media in Britain suggest?

While physical ghettos have become fractured - we can today be found living in Windsor as much as in Wembley - nevertheless a kind of media ghetto can be said to exist. The dominant representation of the Asian on the public stage is: (a) a shopkeeper; (b) an exotic creature with funny habits and tastes; (c) some who speak "just like us" and so are members of the club - not like the majority of them! There is little - if any - public awareness of major Asian industrialists & entrepreneurs, scientists, academics or politicians.

Access to the Media has certainly increased and is set to continue. But a large question mark hovers over whether we are responsibly controlling our role in the media. This is a question that becomes most pertinent in the case of East, Zee, Sunrise & the Asian Press: the "specialist" Asian media.

Our media feeds us a relentless diet courtesy of Bollywood, making little effort to inform its public: to stimulate its mind & heart, as much as it stimulates its senses of nostalgia and envy. Generations of Asians are being reared in this country with scant knowledge of their history - not even the history of migration to this country; scant knowledge of their culture - beyond Bollywood & Bhangra; and even less knowledge of their languages. Our educational system on the whole does not cater for this; nor does mainstream media. Have we not the power to effect a change here?

The loss of a culture is signalled nowhere more clearly than in its language. A test I often employ for my actors is the sound "ld". The sound does not exist in the English language. As far as I'm aware, it is unique to the languages of the sub-continent. In losing the ability to make this sound, we lose the particular flavour, the *russ* of a culture. It irritates me no end that we have presenters and newscasters who cannot articulate Asian words without anglicising them. It is possible to be fluent in several languages. But is there a quality control insisting upon it? The minimum respect one can pay to another is to get the other's name right: i.e., as they would pronounce it. It is more usual to see white presenters taking the trouble to do so than Asian ones. It is as if the Asian can only announce his or her modernity or membership of the club by mis-pronouncing Asian names & words. Rather like Customs & Immigration. Whenever I return to Heathrow from abroad, I always find the Asian Immigration Officials worse than white ones. Confronted by an Asian, it seems the official is desperate to prove his or her credentials to colleagues by being harsher on fellow ethnics!

So, the cultural change that is underway through the media seems to exist on the axis of a contradiction: on the one hand a desperate desire to & an enthusiasm for

presenting Asian aspects of life in Britain; on the other, an equally desperate desire to please the "mainstream" - to be like everyone else.

There is an observation of Mahatma Gandhi's that comes to mind - as apt now as when it was first articulated in the 1920s: 'I want the winds of the world to blow freely about my house; but I don't want those to sweep me off my feet' !

Asians, peculiarly, I think, seem to feel that there is a contradiction between being Asian and being part of the mainstream. A contradiction that, on the whole, is not apparent amongst the Afro-Caribbean or the Jewish communities. A possible reason could be the lack, in Britain, of any formal network of business entrepreneurs on the one hand and artists and intellectuals on the other.

It seems to me that in the 50th anniversary year of India and Pakistan's independence - as much as the year when Hong Kong reverts to China and the British Empire is finally laid to rest - we need to consider a more pertinent "independence" project for Asians in Britain. An independence not of territory but of the spirit and the image. As migrants and descendants of migrants, we perhaps more so than any other, are "imagined communities" - to use the phrase of the cultural analyst, Benedict Anderson. Consider the term "Asian" itself: a complete misnomer, of meaning only in Britain, whose origin dates back just 30 years, when the exodus from Kenya occurred.

Our need - which is the need of every healthy human community - is for stories of ourselves. Be it of the 1st Asian MP (way back in 1895) or of shampoo (whose etymology lies in the Hindi word "champa" - the act of massaging the hair with oil: a practice foreign to Europeans before the 18th century).

It seems to me that our very evident visuality in the British landscape is our problem: we are not black enough to be Black, nor white enough to pass-off as English men and women; as well as being too Asian to be Indian and too Indian to be English!

What, then, to suggest be placed on the Asian Agenda for British Public Policy? To assert, unashamedly, the Asian-ization of Britain through:

- a body to encourage and facilitate business involvement in the arts (along the lines of the Association of Business Sponsorship of the Arts). If Asian Business considers it unnecessary to involve itself with the Media and Arts, it will be taking too short-term a view of itself: image sells, today, more than ever before;
- the establishment of a media monitoring body; to gather data on Asian presence and representation in the Media as a whole; and lobby for changes

Finally, to return to my notion of an "independence project", I'll conclude with a photograph, a text and an image. These all bespeak an independence of spirit, of the imagination, not of narrow territoriality.

The photograph is from Gandhi's visit to London in 1933, to attend the Round-Table Conference. Invited to tea with King George V, Gandhi chose to sit in the august imperial presence dressed in his usual garb of dhoti and shawl. Asked by reporters afterwards why he'd chosen to dress so sparingly, a smiling Gandhi replied that George V was dressed well enough for both of them!

The text I have in mind is an extraordinary couplet by the Urdu classical poet Ghalib, writing at a time when it was obvious that the world he had known was changing irrevocably:

*Humm wahan hain jahaan humko bhi kuchh hamaari khabar nahin aati*

("I am in that place where I am a stranger to myself")

And finally, an image, from the greatest writer of our times, Salman Rushdie: in *Midnight's Children*, there looms the character of the Rani of Cooch Naheen, whose disease is that her skin's turning white!

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