

RACIAL STRIFE IN BRITAIN

The Color Bomb

Suddenly that unsporting term, Race, reared its colored head above the British horizon towards mid-1976. 19-year-old Dinesh Chaudhuri, and a Palestinian friend, were stabbed to death in London's Woodford area on May 21. Gurdip Singh Chaggar, another teenaged Sikh youth, was killed on June 4 in Southall. On June 12, a white youth was murdered by non-whites of East Ham district. On June 15, an Asian bus conductor was killed in the doorway of a bar at Bradford. Racial riots flared up in London on June 6, and officials described them as the worst since the Notting Hill riots in North London in 1958. The June 6 flare-up was sparked off by a Briton who leaned out of his car and called passing Asians "bastards." The youths smashed his car.

600 Asians marched to Southall Police Headquarters on June 6 to protest against Chaggar's killing. On June 8, Prime Minister James Callaghan called for calm among the British population. "I urge every one not to allow passion to

destroy our reputation as a tolerant, cohesive and unified society," he told the Commons. When a projected Race Relations Act went on the statute books, he said, it would be "an indication to the minority groups that they are free to live here as free and equal citizens with everybody else." On July 4, more than 30 organizations participated in a mile-long anti-racist march to 10 Downing Street. An estimated 10,000 men, women and children including whites, Chinese and West Indians walked hand in hand with the Asians from Hyde Park Corner to the Prime Minister's residence.

"Why did we come here in the first place?" asks A Sivanandan, Director of the Institute of Race Relations. "It is said we came because we thought the streets were paved with gold. If they are, we know one thing for sure: it is our gold they are paved with. What is more, it's the gold of our labor that paves them still. The real story of our immigration begins in colonialism."



GURDIP SINGH CHAGGAR

And colonialism does hold the key to immigration, and concomitantly to racial disharmony. The genesis of the "If they are black, send them back; if they are white they are all right" story can be traced to the First World War, when several thousand Indian sailors were enlisted in the English Navy. India was then undivided and part of the British Empire. Queen Victoria had proclaimed herself Empress of India around the turn of the 20th Century, and more and more Indians who weren't exactly nationalistic began to regard the British Isles as Mother England. Between the two World Wars there was a considerable influx of Asians into Britain. Many of them took up jobs as door to door salesman, or bus conductors, or janitors. They weren't averse, too, to jobs that were loathsome to the average Briton, like cleaning the lavatories at Heathrow Airport. The Asian immigration reached very large proportions after the Second World War, when Britain was suffering from an acute manpower shortage. Sikhs and East Bengalis comprised the majority of immigrants.

Stories of their "affluent" living reached Punjab and neighboring provinces in India. Since it also suited the British Government, it freely issued job vouchers and entry permits. The flood of immigrants continued unabated till the Commonwealth Immigrants Act was introduced in 1962. Cheap

CAR CARRYING CHAGGAR'S BODY INCHING ALONG THROUGH CROWDS OF MOURNERS NEAR RAMGARHIA GURDWARA, LONDON.





MR. JAMES CALLAGHAN

labor was not needed any longer, and the British public, spurred on by racist elements, began to worry about the possible connotations of a Britain swamped by black and brown skins.

The common complaint against immigrants in Britain has been that they have never tried to integrate with the host population. This is where the racist Briton's xenophobia finds sustenance. The immigrants' ties to their mother countries have been too strong to enable free intercourse with the subjects of the host nation. In a "nation of shopkeepers", the Asian is reputed for his commercial doggedness. The Asians are prepared to take up jobs which the normal Englishman would frown at. They work as ticket vendors, bus conductors, postmen, grocers, watchmen. The Gujaratis turn to shop-

keeping in the main. George Schaller mentions in his book **The Year Of The Gorilla**: "The Indians remain in the dark interior of their stores, a world apart, dreaming of the day when they can return to their homeland as rich men."

Britain today has a total immigrant population of roughly 600,000, of whom 25,000 live in London's East End. Southall, Brick Lane, Aldgate East, Mile End Road — these may rightly be called Little South Asias. Sikhs from the Jullundur district of the Punjab, Gujaratis, Pakistanis from Karachi and from the North-West frontier area, and Sylhet Muslims from Bangladesh, they are squeezed into a two square mile area straddling the main Uxbridge Road. The Asians have often been accused of living in utterly squalid conditions, of not bothering to consider the feelings of their white fellows, of behaving in a boorish manner when they do mix, and generally, of proving to be drains on the British economy.

The immigrants claim they are a peaceful people. Detective Chief Superintendent Jim Sewell of the Southall precinct house describes his area as the "quietest patch on my long beat. In my 18 months here, I was not called in to investigate a single serious crime."

What is indubitable is that a single Asian immigrant is sufficient to start a huge inflow of people who are related to him in vague ways. To an Indian, any relative, whether once or twice removed, is either a "cousin" or an

"uncle". This "uncle syndrome" has led to horrified Britons watching their Asian neighbor's flat filling up overnight with a dozen fresh immigrants. The Asians are, in addition, carried away by the thought of making more money than they ever made before. They work hard, too hard. They work three shifts, three Asians using a single bed in 8-hour "sleep shifts" in-between. The result is, firstly, that they amass much more money than their easy-going white neighbors, and secondly, that they have no time to pay attention to hygiene, their living quarters "getting to resemble Salvation Army dormitories" in course of time.

One member of the extremely fanatic Monday Club is reported to have said that "all blacks (and browns) are like pigs, they live and breed like pigs, and all association with them should be avoided by English people." The Asians have also enraged their hosts by repatriating huge chunks of sterling currency to their relatives in the motherlands. In addition, they prefer food and dress and furnishings that are very authentically Asian, and so they import substantial quantities of these, leading rabid English economists to issue forecasts of a disastrous balance of payments!

In a typical English town, a Gujarati grocer will keep his shop open on Saturdays and Sundays, while his British counterparts down their shutters on Friday evenings and take off for a lazy week-end. This results in the Gujarati getting most of the weekend business, and, charmed probably by his attitude of obsequious service and his wife's charming smile (the amazing thing is that the majority of immigrant wives do not understand a word of English), more and more townspeople flock to the Gujarati grocer even on weekdays. What follows is ire on the part of the British grocers, and you have the beginnings of a mini-Southall right there.

What has happened after the June events? An 'Improved' Race Relations Bill was passed in the Commons on July 9 by 82 votes to 3. Opposition MPs offered stiff objections, but the Government's

THE NATIONAL FRONT TAKES OUT ONE OF ITS ANTI-IMMIGRANT MARCHES





ASIANS PROTESTING IMMIGRATION CURBS IN TRAFALGAR SQUARE

opinion was summarized by Mrs Renee Short, Labor MP from Wolverhampton, who said: "I am very glad we have got this legislation through. The whole of the country will now see that the Labor Government is in the vanguard of the fight against racialism and incitement to violence on these grounds."

These facts may lead one to believe that the racial heap of hay has never been more alight. Things are not so bad, however, and in the context of the second-class treatment the Asians have been receiving for a long time, the authorities have had to sit up now and take effective steps to end racial disharmony. When Gurdip Singh's parents were asked by Shiva Naipaul whether they wanted to return to India, they said: "Why should we go back to India? Millions of Indians live outside India. Going abroad is not something that Indians alone do. You ask me why we wanted to come here, why we didn't want to return to our country of origin." (The Chaggars were expelled from Tanzania). "Well, why do people ever want to go anywhere except to make money, live a good life and give their children a good education?"

The Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1962, reduced immigration substantially by establishing a voucher system to control entry. In August 1965, the Labor Government then in power published a

White Paper on Immigration which reduced the number of vouchers by more than half, and proposed measures to assist integration into what was called "already a multi-racial society." The Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1968, took away the unconditional right of British passport holders to enter the Mother Country. The 1971 Act set all those entering on a par with aliens — rightless, vulnerable and highly exploitable.

A Race Relations Board was set up by the Government in February 1966. On the immigrants' side, the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) was set up in December 1964 after a visit to London by Dr Martin Luther King Jr. It was extremely successful as a pressure group agitating for legislation against discrimination. But CARD has seemingly lost its sense of direction in the 1970's, and nothing much is heard of it today. Roy Jenkins, who was instrumental as Home Secretary in getting the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968 passed, spoke of integration "not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal

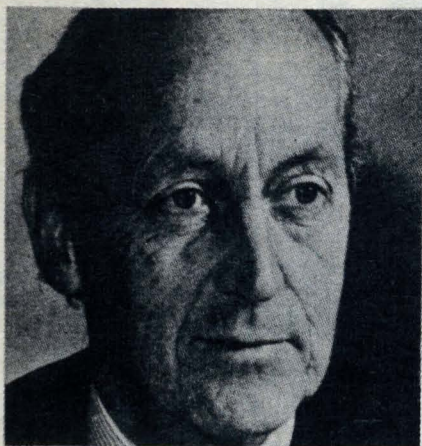
opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance." This, however, is more a political definition than a practical policy. Jenkins' optimism seems outdated in the light of the 1976 unrest.

Immigration will, analyzed objectively, always be a problem all developed nations face. "Flights" of talent and manpower from underdeveloped countries to economically affluent ones is inevitable in the context of lack of sufficient opportunities for putting that talent to lucrative use in the countries of origin. As A. Sivanandan says: "Britain took (India's) wealth and left us with a labor force that could not be put to work without money, without capital. Britain had the capital, we had the labor — it was a basic economic law that they should seek each other."

And so racism continues to invade, silently, the psyches of the British. What is racism exactly, apart from being a dirty six-letter word? Sir Arthur Keith maintained that racial prejudice serves an evolutionary function: by keep-

SIKH FAMILY ARRIVING AT GATWICK AIRPORT, LONDON





SIR GEOFFREY WILSON, CHAIRMAN OF
BRITAIN'S RACE RELATIONS BOARD

ing particular populations separate it enables them to evolve faster. Some people dislike the word 'racism'. Racial units are best called ethnic groups, they say, and the relations which the man in street calls 'racial' would be better labelled 'ethnic'. Whatever the rhetoric on the topic, the British population will probably continue to include a substantial number of people who believe that their biological nature imposes narrow constraints upon plans to bring together minorities that they believe to be racially distinct. In most societies inequalities between strata have not only existed in fact but have also been accepted as normal and legitimate:

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high or lowly
And ordered their estate.

Magazines and newspapers in India have been carrying a series of articles on the recent racial flare-ups in Southall and around. If some of the writers sound aggrieved and annoyed at the plight of the Asians in Britain it may be excused as a natural brotherly reaction. The Blacks and the Browns are no doubt being baited in Britain, just as the Romans displayed racial prejudice towards the Celts in the days when Britain was a colony!

So racist leaders like Enoch Powell, and Robert Mellish, ex-chief whip of the Labor Party, and Martin Webster, leader of the National Front, have emerged as the Malthuses of modern Britain: un-

like that gloomy economist, however, they are raising the spectre of a day when Britain will be chock-full of 'nigger bastards'. Webster said in early June: "We are telling the Asians we do not feel that they should be here . . . Our tactics are more honest than those of our politicians . . . Yes, we are a racist party and we are 'respectabilizing racialism' . . . Our election slogan will be 'British jobs for Britons alone.' . . ." And then there was that firebrand speech by Kingston Read of the Blackburn Council: "I have been told that I cannot refer to colored immigrants so you will excuse me if I refer to niggers, wogs and coons . . ." This was on June 11. Read also provoked immigrant



ROY JENKINS

rage by saying "One down, one million to go" after Gurdip Singh Chaggar's death. On the other hand, fuel was added to the National Front's fire when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Donald Coggan, said in his diocesan newsletter: "There must be a clearly defined limit (on immigration). The forces of law and order must be supported in their resistance to illegal immigration." Later, in an obvious attempt to calm a wave of angry reactions from immigrant leaders, Dr Coggan clarified his statement, saying he did not mean he was going back on his "commitment to re-unite immigrant families."

The Asians have reacted to all this oratory with emotions ranging from injured innocence to

brash belligerence. They have also constituted vigilance patrols in immigrant localities. An uneasy truce hangs over Southall now, giving rise to the conjecture that every nation needs some kind of "hot spot" or the other to keep its furnaces stoked: after Soweto, Dublin, and Beirut, Southall seems to be the newest (and colorful) addition.

The picture is not so dark now. The National Front and National Party may scream hatred through their journals, *Spearhead* and *Britain First*, but the majority of Britons are eminently able to rationalize and to see the immigrant question in the proper perspective. Powellism notwithstanding, there is no reason why brown and white people should not co-exist. There is no reason why people should regard a dark brown skin as less respectable than a pale pink one. Chaudhuri and Chaggar may go down as martyrs in the cause of the Asian emigre to Britain, but in the final reckoning, the Asians will have to make do in Britain, Powell or no Powell. They may never get to colonize Britain, but in these days when Rule Britannica is a weak adage, and the pound is slipping alarmingly on international markets, the immigrant question may perhaps be one of topical expediency, a welcome change from the shudderings of a shortfallen economy.

CHAITANYA KALBAG

A MALAYSIAN SURGEON AT WORK

