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Discrepant Representations of Multi-Asian Leicester: Institutional

Discourse and Everyday Life in the 'Model' Multicultural City

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2013

# **Discrepant Representations of Multi-Asian Leicester: Institutional**

## **Discourse and Everyday Life in the ‘Model’ Multicultural City**

**Seán McLoughlin**

The city of Leicester has had undoubted success in managing ethnic diversity since the 1980s, and has been lauded as a model of ‘community cohesion’. Explaining the dynamics underlying this, Singh (2006) argues that the ‘serendipitous’ convergence of East African Asian social capital, and the stable local rule of a Labour Party group committed to diversity, ‘gradually produced a virtuous cycle’. However, based upon an original study of writing about British Asian diasporas in Leicester since the 1960s, this research paper offers a deliberately more contested re-narration of the model multicultural city and its making. Qualifying institutional *narratives of ‘success’*, I first interrogate the accounts of Leicester City Council and the local evening newspaper, the Leicester Mercury. My argument is that there has been a shift from indifference and rejection in the 1970s, through celebratory co-option, containment and commodification in the 1980s and 1990s, to much greater critical scrutiny of Leicester’s dominant discourse of civic unity from the mid-2000s. Against the backdrop of key neighbourhoods below the scale of the city, I also re-evaluate the ‘back-stories’ of Asian Leicester which are typically obscured by the institutional emphasis on ‘success’. My argument is that more contested accounts of everyday ‘lived experience of a locality’ (Brah 1996: 192) begin to emerge in oral history of Ugandan Asian expellees struggle to recover their middle-class status, ethnography of the tactical engagement of Asian community leaders and activists with council efforts to incorporate them, and novels which chart young British Asians’ often vehement critiques of persisting ethno-religious polarization at the grassroots.

Keywords: writing, British Asians, Leicester, institutional discourse, everyday life

### Introduction

The public image of Leicester, a compact, medium-sized city in England’s East Midlands, is strongly associated today with its Indian heritage population. At the time of the 2011 Census it was home to the country’s highest proportion of British

Indians (28 per cent),<sup>1</sup> the majority being of Gujarati heritage. While only Harrow and Brent in Outer London have a higher proportion of Hindus than Leicester (15.2 per cent or 50,087),<sup>2</sup> the presence of South Asian Muslims, Sikhs and Jains, also makes the city the most multi-Asian (Vertovec 1994) and multi-faith location in the UK. In the wake of the riots by young British Pakistani men in northern English towns during 2001, it was Leicester (alongside Southall in west London) that was lauded in central government reports as a model of ‘community cohesion’ (Cantle 2001). Projecting itself as the ‘premier multicultural city in Europe’ (Singh and Tatla 2006: 143), since the late 1970s Leicester City Council (LCC) has successfully emphasized a public discourse of civic unity which has been materialized in public celebrations of cultural diversity, including festivals such as Diwali, and supported by the good relations cultivated amongst a network of community leaders.

Explanations frequently advanced for Leicester’s apparent success in ethnic and faith relations have tended to focus on two underlying factors: i) a high level of political commitment from a stable, Labour-led, local council (Winstone 1996; G. Singh 2006); and ii) the social capital of its single largest minority ethnic grouping, the East African Asians, who as experienced ‘twice migrants’ adapted quickly to life in the city and prospered economically (Bose 1979a, 1979b; Marett 1989). The general buoyancy of Leicester’s local economy, historically well

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-286262> (11 December 2012).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Of approximately 307,000 Hindus living in Britain in 1977, 70 per cent were Gujarati in origin; 15 per cent Punjabi; and the remaining 15 per cent came from other regions of India’ (Burghart 1987: 8).

served by adaptable small and medium-sized light manufacturing and enterprise, is also a fundamental structural factor which cannot be ignored, though this is rarely explored in depth in the literature (Byrne 1998). In a key 2003 contribution, reprinted with a new postscript in *A Postcolonial People* (Ali et al. 2006), political scientist, Gurharpal Singh argues that the ‘serendipitous’ convergence of factors in the city ‘has gradually produced a virtuous cycle’ (2006: 302).<sup>3</sup> However, like Singh, I want to suggest that there is still the need for ‘a radical reassessment’ (2006: 301) of Leicester as a ‘model’ multicultural city. Indeed, this chapter advances such a project in an original fashion by re-examining forty years of writing about Asian Leicester for the first time.

Drawing upon sources concerning multicultural policy and the press across three key periods from the 1970s, my initial task in each case will be to interrogate the changing face of institutional rhetoric in Leicester, presenting a novel contextualization of its local configuration. Firstly, I will examine how, against a national context of the racialization of citizenship and the rise of the far-right National Front (NF) in the 1960s, LCC and the local evening newspaper, the Leicester Mercury, contributed to the outworking of tension locally by actively resisting the permanent resettlement of Ugandan Asian evacuees.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, I will illuminate how, impacted by recession, changing demography, new race relations legislation and neoliberal Thatcherite policies, a progressive ruling Labour group

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<sup>3</sup> However, such factors are ‘unexceptional’ (G. Singh 2006: 297) and are observable in west and north London, for example.

<sup>4</sup> Ugandan Asians preferred the term ‘expellee’ or ‘evacuee’ to ‘refugee’ given their legitimate claims to resettlement as British citizens (Marett 1989: 169).

reinvented Leicester as a model of multicultural success from the late 1970s and into the 1980s. Thirdly, I will explore how, despite the city's continuing reputation for managing 'community cohesion' into the 2000s, in an age of insecurity, competing institutional discourses at national and international scales have subjected the Leicester 'brand' to much greater scrutiny.

My second task is to explore spaces 'outside' and scales 'below' the city and its institutions, assessing the extent to which engagement with a different body of writing in scholarly ethnography, oral history and fiction, enables a more complex and contested account of everyday 'lived experience of a locality' (Brah 1996: 192) to be re-narrated. In terms of the three key periods under consideration, I dwell upon selected 'back-stories' of Asian Leicester which I maintain are typically obscured by a longstanding institutional emphasis on 'success': firstly, the painful struggle of Ugandan Asians to recover their middle-class status in a 'racist' city during the 1970s; secondly, the 'tactical' (cf. de Certeau 1984) engagement of Asian community leaders and activists with LCC's ultimately conservative efforts to incorporate them during the 1980s; and, thirdly, the persistence of ethno-religious parochialism at the grassroots into the 2000s, as well as its critique by Asian youth. Whether in the home, at work, the temple or the street, these 'back-stories' also underline that Vertovec's (1994) catchy characterization of 'multi-Asian' diversity in Leicester must be extended from accounting for plural ethno-national 'groups' to the multiple ways in which

different 'British Asian' subjectivities are locally qualified and cross-cut by intersections of class, religion, gender, generation, sexuality and so on.

I begin in the next section, however, by very briefly outlining the growth and changing composition of Leicester's multi-Asian population since the 1960s, drawing special attention to the religio-ethnic and class-based clustering around its two most distinctive residential locales, Highfields and Belgrave. Indeed, it was in the latter neighbourhood that Dr Pippa Virdee of De Montfort University organized the Writing British Asian Leicester event on 20 September 2007.<sup>5</sup> Held in the Peepul Centre,<sup>6</sup> a multi-purpose arts and community venue in the city, the story of the organization behind the Centre in many ways exemplifies the entangling of changing institutional discourses in Leicester and the everyday lived experiences of multi-Asian localities. The Centre's Chair explained that just as Ugandan Asian 'expellees' had ignored LCC's warnings not to come to the city in 1972, in seeking to establish a community space open to all, but run by Asian women, the Belgrave Behano ('Sisters') had also been driven by an ethic of 'never taking no for an answer'. The Behano were formed by young Asian women during 1979 in a neighbourhood of Leicester that East African investment was transforming both economically and culturally. With a grant from LCC, they established Leicester's first Asian women's centre in 1983, later publishing a

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<sup>5</sup> See also a working paper by Virdee (2009) which is posted at: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/assets/papers/WBAC006.pdf>; my report of the Leicester event is posted at: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/writingbritishasiancities/leicestermeeting1.html>.

<sup>6</sup> The 'Peepul' Centre draws its name from the Sacred Fig tree which in Indian religious traditions symbolizes enlightenment as well as happiness.

report on domestic violence that proved controversial in the ‘community’ (Daily Jang, 21 September 1995). However, in a changing political climate the Behano struggled to generate the external income necessary to run the £20M Peepul Centre, which opened in 2005 as a social enterprise. Shortly after the Writing British Asian Leicester event, control passed out of their hands but its founders remain high profile political activists in a city where British Asian women have been more visible in working and public life than almost anywhere else in the UK outside London.<sup>7</sup>

#### Ethnicity, Religion and Class in the Mohallas of Highfields and Belgrave

A researcher and outreach officer from East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA) gave an overview of community-based local and oral history projects concerning Asian Leicester since the 1990s. For instance, Highfields Remembered (Leicestershire Multicultural Archive Project 1996),<sup>8</sup> records a marked contrast in attitudes to this neighbourhood between Muslims, who still live in the area, and the many Hindus and Sikhs who have since moved away. Representatives from East Midlands Economic Network (EMEN) spoke about Belgrave Memories (Law et al. 2007),<sup>9</sup> a project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), which recalls both initial white working-class opposition to East African dispersal into this neighbourhood, as well as on-going anxieties around spatial boundaries amongst Hindus and Muslims (cf. Hussain et al. 2007).

At the Peepul Centre event it was suggested that the earliest sub-continental settlers in Leicester were a Panjabi Muslim family who opened a spectacles shop in the 1920s. During the 1950s and 1960s South Asians were initially less well established in the city than elsewhere in Britain, perhaps because some of the

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<sup>7</sup> In 2008-9 Leicester’s Manjula Sood was the country’s first Asian woman to be elected as Lord Mayor.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://highfields.dmu.ac.uk/index.html> (18 October 2012).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/community/resources/belgrave/index.html> (18 October 2012).



opportunities for work were specifically for women. In 1951 there were 638 people of South Asian heritage living in Leicester, mostly Panjabi Sikh males from Jullundur and Hoshiarpur who had some connection to the British Army (Marett 1989: 1; Sardar 2008: 5). By 1961 this figure had risen to 3,742 (Phillips 1981: 102), with Gujaratis and Pakistanis now predominating. However, it was Gujarati and Panjabi families from former British East African colonies (Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi but most especially from Kenya) that were mainly responsible for boosting the South Asian population of Leicester several times over to 20,190 in 1970 (Phillips 1981: 103). As a racialized, residentially clustered and endogamous middle strata between Africans and British colonists (Brown 2006: 46), whether as post-war migrants or the descendants of nineteenth-century indentured labourers, artisans or entrepreneurs, South Asian heritage minorities in East Africa became the targets of ‘Africanization’ or ‘nationalization’ policies in the newly independent states. Indeed, with the expulsion of the Ugandan Asians in 1972, and secondary migration to Leicester amongst East Africans and Gujaratis in the UK thereafter, the numbers of South Asians in the city doubled to 42,000 by 1978 and trebled to 66,564 by 1991 (Phillips 1981: 103; Vertovec 1994: 261).

The 1991 UK Census was the first to ask a question about ethnicity. While this encouraged greater disaggregation of the category ‘Asian’, most East African Asians were forced to identify themselves as ethnically ‘Indian’ or ‘Asian Other’. In any case, during 1991 Leicester was home to 60,297 Indians, 3,644 Pakistanis,

1,053 Bangladeshis and 2,570 Asian Others (Vertovec 1994: 260). By the 2001 Census the number of Indians in the city had grown to 72,033 or 26 per cent of the city's population, figures which now stand at 93,335 or 28.3 per cent in 2011. A question on religion asked for the first time in 2001, and repeated again in 2011, confirms that the proportion of Hindus in Leicester is stable at around 15 per cent of population, as is the proportion of Sikhs at around 4 per cent.<sup>10</sup> However, the proportion of Muslims has been growing in recent decades and for the first time in 2011 they overtook Hindus as the largest non-Christian faith grouping in the city at 18.6 per cent (as compared to 11 per cent in 2001).<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the rehearsals of statistics, which are a mainstay of institutional discourse, multi-Asian Leicester has consisted mainly in the distinctive dynamics of contrasting mohallas (neighbourhoods) such as Highfields and Belgrave (cf. Virdee 2009). The classic inner-city 'zone of transition', Highfields did not experience post-war gentrification (Marett 1989: 3) and, with little resistance, Panjabis, Gujaratis and Pakistanis, as well as West Indians, displaced their predecessors, the Jews, Irish, Latvians and Poles (Phillips 1981: 107; Winstone

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council-services/council-and-democracy/city-statistics/demographic-and-cultural/> (18 October 2012). The figures for 20 years previously had been 14 per cent, 4.3 per cent and 3.8 per cent respectively (cf. Vertovec 1994: 266). Notably, Oadby and Wigston in Leicestershire ranks number five in the country for the proportion of British Indians (17.7 per cent or 9,938). The numbers of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are 5,112, 3,256 and 3,664 respectively.

<sup>11</sup> The increasing Muslim population can be explained in part due to higher fertility levels but also new immigration amongst Somalis, Afghans and Kurds. Indeed, while Gujaratis still represent the largest ethnic Muslim grouping in Leicester, and there is a longstanding Pakistani and Bangladeshi presence, 8-10,000 Somalis have migrated more recently from the Netherlands, having chosen to finally re-cluster their families in Leicester following the civil war in their homeland (van Liempt 2011). Thus ethnic diversity amongst Muslims is especially marked and their cohesion in the city cannot be presumed.

1996). Here, 'Immigrant choice of accommodation and location was principally governed by frugality and a desire for social isolation from the host' (Phillips 1981: 105; cf. Rex and Moore 1967; Dahya 1974). Such clustering avoided racism and cultural compromise, and reflected the attraction of proximity to specific ethno-religious and caste-based institutions and services, as well as discrimination by white estate agents and vendors. In this context, family reunion simply reinforced the 'desire for social and spatial encapsulation' (Phillips 1981: 106), with a level of 'institutional completeness' achieved as the city's first mosque (1962), mandir (1969), Asian cinemas, bhangra club (1965) and sports association (1966) were established (Burghart 1987: 9; Vertovec 1994: 270; Martin and Singh 2002: 10).

As geographer, Debbie Phillips (1981), shows, however, into the 1970s, Leicester's Asian population quickly became marked by 'spatial polarization' between Hindus and Muslims (cf. Phillips and Karn 1991: 72). Moreover, while such divisions were religiously and ethnically marked, as Byrne argues, they also reflected clear evidence of 'class segregation within the Indian community' (1998: 712). As an educated, urban middle-class (cf. Bhachu 1985; 1991) with a pre-existing knowledge of English and no 'myth of return' (cf. Anwar 1979; Cohen 1997), when East African Asian evacuees settled in Leicester from the mid-to-late 1960s, they aspired to 'physically distance themselves from the sub-continentals in Highfields' considering them 'to be largely uneducated and of peasant background' (Vertovec 1994: 263). Thus, more affluent East African Asians, and

especially Kenyan Hindus, began to disperse and re-cluster in Belgrave, which was an established white working-class neighbourhood. While declining, it was not given up without initial protest (Philips 1981: 108; cf. Hussain et al. 2007). Nevertheless, since the 1970s, ‘access [to Belgrave] has been firmly denied’ to others by East African Hindu vendors, estate agents, financiers and solicitors (cf. Hussain et al. 2007: 22). Similarly, Phillips and Karn (1991: 72) record Muslims, for their part, refusing council housing because of its proximity to Hindus.

Writing for *New Society* (16 & 23 August 1979) at the end of the 1970s, then, journalist, Mihir Bose, was able to contrast ‘bleak’ Highfields to Belgrave Road, which had been transformed ‘into one of the most prosperous high streets in the country’ (Bose 1979a: 340). Still the destination in the Midlands for shoppers seeking out saris, shrine paraphernalia or Gujarati and East African vegetables and cuisine (Virdee 2009), the businesses of middle-class Kenyans, Ugandans and Gujaratis along what is known today as ‘the Golden Mile’ represented a clear ‘story of worldly success’ (Bose 1979a: 339). Rather than the ‘encapsulation’ and ‘isolation’ of Highfields, these small Asian businesses built on entrepreneurial experience gathered outside the UK, exhibited a confident, outward-looking attitude to the local environment (Clark and Rughani 1983; cf. G. Singh 2006). Moreover, by the late 1970s, those prospering in business and the professions were also moving beyond Belgrave to the higher status, white ‘leafy suburbs’ and

countryside (Phillips 1981).<sup>12</sup> However, as my first ‘back-story’ illuminating the everyday lived experience of a locality underlines, for the Ugandan Asians especially, the recovery of their middle-class status involved significant struggle in the face of exclusionary institutional discourses.

*Ugandan Asians and ‘the Racist City’: The Struggle Behind the Success*

A local historian noted that LCC had gone so far as to take out an advertisement in the Ugandan Argus warning the South Asians there facing expulsion against coming to Leicester. A refugee with a high public profile locally underlined that the majority of Asians in Uganda had been self-employed and had never worked for anyone else. Yet in Leicester he saw many take up work for which they were overqualified. He also witnessed their influence on the 1974 strike at Imperial Typewriters. Reflecting on the gendered nature of East African Asians’ narratives of migration, an oral historian remarked upon the contribution of her field to understanding the relationship between migrants’ memories of a contented life in Uganda, Kenya and elsewhere, and how this related to their struggle to re-establish themselves in Leicester.

The definitive account of Ugandan Asians’ resettlement in Leicester is Valerie Marett’s study, *Immigrants Settling in the City* (1989). A multicultural education specialist who was also vice-chair of Leicester Community Relations Council (CRC) for several years, Marett’s (1989) reflection on the 1970s and 1980s is especially valuable as an analysis of both the policy of LCC and the media discourse of the Mercury in a period which predates the ‘success’ of Leicester’s management of diversity. While the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act placed

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<sup>12</sup> However, attachment to the ethnic enclave differed markedly amongst the 830 dispersing households, with 45 per cent classified as ‘traditional non-assimilating’ and often stricter about religio-cultural observance, while 20 per cent were ‘non-traditional assimilating’ and retained few ethnic linkages beyond periodic participation in festivals. The rest were viewed as being in transition between the two positions.

restrictions on entry to the UK for Asians not holding British passports, following the arrival of Kenyan Asians from the mid to late 1960s, the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which was pushed through in just a few days, racialized postcolonial citizenship thereafter by adding a grandparental clause as a condition of free entry (Burghart 1987: 8). Marett relates how on 4 August 1972 the Ugandan President, Idi Amin, decreed that about 80,000 people of Indian origin, most of whom did not possess Ugandan citizenship but held British passports, had 90 days to leave the country. While some were already planning to leave Uganda and so seeking to move their assets, by the end of the month it was clear that they would all have to depart with only £50 plus personal effects, thus abandoning property worth between £100M and £150M (1989: 48). With a slow-down in the UK economy, public services under pressure and coming not long after Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech (1968), control of immigration had been one of the incoming Conservative government's key general election promises in 1970. Thus, initially it sought to do a deal with Amin to allow the expellees to stay but, ultimately, on 16 August, the UK accepted the Ugandan Asians' right of entry.

It was known that Leicester would be a very likely destination for significant numbers of Ugandan Asian evacuees given its existing East African connections. However, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants vastly (over)estimated the likely number of refugees to target the city at 20,000 (Marett 1989: 10). Central government was also slow to confirm its resettlement strategy over the summer recess and this gave the press a monopoly on public discourse. Against

the context of a language of 'invasion', 'flood' and 'influx', as well as disproportionate attention to right-wing opposition in the Daily Telegraph and Daily Express, Marett examines reporting of the Ugandan 'crisis' in the Mercury. As was the case during the earlier arrival of 60,000 Kenyan Asians in the UK, the newspaper purported to reflect the real fears of 'the people of Leicester' (1989: 56, 58). However, the Mercury had a reputation for 'consciousness of empire' (Chessum 1998: 36) and talked up racial tensions, giving extensive coverage to the NF which had decided to make Leicester a showcase for its 1973 local election campaign. Indeed, the movement saw membership and activity increase significantly in the region during this period. Insisting that no-one else was speaking up for the white working-class, the NF joined with the Enoch Powell Support Group and others to organize a 600-strong march through the city on 9 September 1972. In short, Marett argues that the Mercury contributed significantly to the construction of the Ugandan Asians as a racialized 'threat' or 'problem' (cf. Troyna and Ward 1981). In 1972, most especially between August and October, 42 different headlines addressed the issue with only two failing to report it in these terms (1989: 88); Ugandan Asians themselves were reduced to inanimate 'numbers' (1989: 86).

While there was support for the Ugandan Asians in Leicester from the Anti-Nazi League, Unity Against Racism and others, under increasing pressure from local press reporting and various petitions, a LCC delegation travelled to Whitehall at the end of August to inform central government that the city was 'full'. Any

additional call on resources would put it at risk. Not without the protests of nine councillors, LCC also decided to place an advertisement in the *Ugandan Argus* on 15 September 1972 and thereafter for three weeks, warning Ugandan Asians not to come to Leicester because its public services were already so stretched (Marett 1989: 39). Brent, Wembley, Ealing and Birmingham were all unhappy at the thought of accepting evacuees but Leicester's reputation as the 'Stay Away City' (1989: 53-4) was sealed by its very public campaign.

Ultimately the UK authorities did little to deter the settlement of Ugandan Asians in so-called 'red areas' (1989: 71) like Leicester but no special central government assistance was given to statutory and voluntary community services locally.

About one-fifth of the 30,000 who came to the UK from Uganda eventually found their way to the city (1989: 167), the very rich heading for London or overseas to Canada. In *From Citizen to Refugee*, Professor Mahmood Mamdani's memoir of his last days in Uganda, he suggests that Leicester became a destination in large part because of LCC's advert: 'The advertisement, however, backfired ... now they knew there was some place called Leicester, where there were numerous Asians' (1973: 65; cf. Virdee 2009). However, shifting her focus from a dominant institutional discourse to one of the 'back-stories' about everyday life in the city, Marett insists that while the advertisement did fail to put the Ugandan Asians off, secure dwelling places within pre-existing diasporic networks were key for the evacuees she interviewed: 'When you are being expelled from a country you think



of the refuge with your relatives ... you think of their house, not the city where it is ... we thought of a roof over our heads' (1989: 38).<sup>13</sup>

Marett's work on Ugandan Asians' struggles during the process of resettlement in Leicester is extremely rich in its documentation of the experiences of women especially, the majority of whom were married or engaged, working or studying, and of Hindu Patidar or Lohana background. However, a complementary, recent contribution from Joanna Herbert does more to reflect on the potential insights of oral history in this regard, especially as she pairs it with a scholarly analysis. Going further than *Ugandan Memories*, a publication arising from an East Midlands Economic Network (EMEN) oral history project funded by the HLF, Herbert is able to pursue what the EMEN authors invoke as 'the people's truth' (Law et al. 2009: 10). However, she does this in terms of a much thicker description and more sustained critical commentary and interpretation, describing oral history as 'an accessible medium that gave the respondent the opportunity to express complicated issues and experiences that may have been difficult to articulate' (2006: 147). Indeed, what begin as simple recollections of the stuff of everyday life can unlock the placed, embodied and affective maps of memory and identity which are at the heart of diasporic consciousness (cf. Tolia-Kelly 2010). Thus, elsewhere, Herbert maintains that retelling such narratives can 'enable

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<sup>13</sup> Leicester was also a destination in easy reach of other centres of Gujarati Britain, most especially in London (for example, Harrow, Brent, Barnet and Newham) and, crucially for those who had lost everything, still somewhere where there was work, although unemployment in Leicester did rise significantly immediately after 1972.

forced migrants to express how their lives have been affected by the injustices of history' (2009: 24).

While there was a clear hardening of white attitudes to all Asians during the 1970s,<sup>14</sup> and the East Africans found themselves reframed alongside African Caribbeans in postcolonial Britain's racial hierarchy (Herbert 2008a: 194), as Herbert remarks in *Negotiating Boundaries in the City*, their experiences of racism are rarely invoked directly in oral history (2008a: 76). Rather, the narratives of a downwardly mobile petty bourgeoisie speak more of 'the effects of the loss of social position and of the life they had lived' (Marett 1989: 158), with reminiscences about the 'good life' in Uganda 'inextricably linked to their experience of Britain' (Herbert 2009: 27). Like Marett, Herbert illuminates sharply felt dissatisfaction and resentment at all that had been lost in the present and diasporic nostalgia and yearning for an idealized, carefree past in Uganda. Food as well as landscape and objects still remain dominant emotional metaphors in migrant accounts even after the passing of four decades but Herbert is also clear that such recollections are profoundly gendered (cf. Law et al. 2009; Panayi 2008; Tolia-Kelly 2010). Some men asserted their masculinity in the retelling of heroic 'rags to riches' migration narratives emphasizing independent action, risk, struggle, self-reliance and survival (2008b: 189, 194; 2009: 24). However, for others, unable to re-establish themselves in occupations commensurate with their

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<sup>14</sup> During the 1976 city elections Labour lost control of the council and the NF polled 18 per cent of the vote (cf. Martin and Singh 2002: 11).

status and qualifications in Uganda,<sup>15</sup> the story untold by official narratives of ‘success’ is that their stressful home lives sometimes deteriorated into alcoholism, rows and domestic violence.

For their part, East African Asian women’s oral history narratives also reveal the hardships and tensions of the overcrowded, multi-generational households they shared initially with relatives. In the absence of servants, some had to learn domestic skills for the first time. There is also reference to depression and attempted suicide - ‘usually by overdosing with malaria tablets’ (Marett 1989: 159). In Leicester during the 1970s there was ‘virtually no recognition’ of the need for ‘worry relief’ (1989: 157) or counselling for the evacuees, and while the Belgrave Behano emerged eventually, writing in *New Society*, Bose (1979b) reports Asian protests against a government-funded women’s hostel for ethnic minorities. As Saghal (1992) notes, Asian women’s organizations in Britain have had to do battle with both wider society and their own ‘community’. Indeed, some women never felt secure enough to venture into the neighbourhood (another sharp contrast with Uganda): ‘They felt the pressure too of being part of a community so frightened of losing its traditional values along with its material possessions that it reacted against any further change’ (Marett 1989: 156). Nevertheless, despite their petty bourgeois background, of necessity, many other East African Asian women did take up work in Leicester’s small knitwear factories for meagre pay (Herbert 2008a: 79). Some ultimately gave this up because of the ‘shame’ of undermining

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<sup>15</sup> For example, 5 per cent of Ugandan Asians were teachers but most were not qualified to work in the UK (Marett 1989: 130).

their husbands but others persisted, contributing financially to their families' efforts to secure their own homes or more desirable rented accommodation. Herbert concludes that paid work affirmed the importance of their contribution to 'successful' resettlement, 'exposing the ways in which their lives were constrained, but also demonstrating their strength and capacity to manage' (2006: 143).

In the workplace East African Asian women were at the forefront, too, of various examples of (unsuccessful) industrial action during the 1970s (Law and Haq 2007: 64).<sup>16</sup> On 1 May 1974, 39 Asian workers, including 27 women, walked out on their duties in the assembly section at Imperial Typewriters in Leicester and were followed within 2 days by another 4-500 workers, again mainly 'twice migrant' women. Drawing upon contemporary interviews in *Race Today* (September 1974), a key forum for black political journalism in the 1970s, in her Virago classic, *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain*, writer and activist, Amrit Wilson, identifies their main concerns in terms of unfair quotas and conditions as compared to white workers and unequal union representation. While ultimately they returned to work after 3 months, these Asian women – in contrast to so many mainstream stereotypes of passivity – achieved a new sense of empowerment by confronting discrimination and injustice head on. One of their number, Shardha Behn, reflected in powerful oral testimony:

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<sup>16</sup> The Grunwick photo-processing strike of 1976-8 was the most significant as it secured union support and recognition (Anitha et al. 2012). See also <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/strikingwomen/strikes> for details of various other cases (19 October 2012).

The first day I got back to work, my foreman asked me what I had gained ... He was making fun of me I know. But I told him that I had lost a lot of money but had gained a lot of things. I told him I had learnt how to fight against him for a start. I told him he couldn't push me around anymore ... In the past when I used to get less money in my wage packet I used to start crying ... I told the foreman, 'Next time I won't cry, I'll make you cry'. (1978: 58)

There was no 'next time' at Imperial Typewriters which closed its factory in Leicester the year of the strike with the loss of 1,000 Asian jobs. However, while a decade later, middle-class East African Asian women were still involved in low-paid waged labour alongside working-class white women, there were signs of change. In 1980-1, sociologist and socialist feminist, Sallie Westwood, spent a year as a participant observer on the shop floor in a hosiery company ('Stitchco') in Leicester ('Needletown'), where one-third of the work-force was Indian women. Like the politically engaged ethnographic tradition of urban sociology at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, she was critical of anthropological accounts dwelling on bounded minority ethnic communities (cf. Westwood and Bhachu 1988). Thus, *All Day Everyday*, documents the role of work in women's oppression, both paid work in the factory and unpaid work in the home, examining first hand, too, the processes dividing as well as uniting black and white women, as they became 'classed' 'raced' and 'gendered' (cf. Westwood and Bhachu 1988: 6). For instance, Westwood found that, at 'Stitchco', Indian women were having no more pregnancies than their white colleagues (cf. Robinson 1993: 233), and in 1980-1 no Indian girls were recruited as trainees at the factory. Thus, she illuminates particularly well the 'back-story' of 'successful' Ugandan Asian women's genuine struggles during the 1970s.

Having exposed themselves to spaces of institutional and everyday racism more than many direct migrants, the East Africans had begun to put themselves in a position where, in terms of socio-economic indicators such as education, employment and desirable housing, they would eventually outstrip their white counterparts (Cf. Robinson 1986; 1993: 236):

It was a major source of compensation to some of the Indian women that, despite the hardships and suffering they endured, their children were receiving a British education ... “England is hard for us, but it is good for our children ... they can get educated here and they won’t come to the factory”. (1984: 224)

#### *‘Red’ Leicester as a Multicultural City: Political Incorporation and the Tactics of Asian Leaderships and Youth*

A representative from Leicester’s Race Equality Centre (REC) told how, in the 1980s, a radical local Labour council emerged that embraced anti-racism. While the research and outreach officer from East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA) spoke about recording the story of multicultural education in relation to celebrating Indian music and dance, a member of Leicester Council of Faiths (LCF, founded 1986), related how town planning had also come to incorporate religious diversity. Against the backdrop of often forgotten riots in Highfields during early July 1981, a representative from Leicester Nirvana Football Club also explained how young men associated with a previous incarnation of his team had proved a challenge not only to LCC, but also to middle-class Gujarati stereotypes of working-class Panjabis.

Anti-racism in the mid-1970s was a strong influence on a young, progressive Labour caucus in Leicester (Winstone 1996). They had opposed the advert in the Ugandan Argus and, against the context of the Race Relations Act of 1976 - which gave local authorities statutory powers to develop race relations - there were efforts to improve the city’s image in this regard. As Marett reports, ‘By 1974 it [Leicester] was among the first of the Labour Party branches to print

electoral messages in Asian languages. It opposed the decision to allow the NF to stage marches in the city in 1974 and 1979' (1989: 168). However, it was only in the early 1980s that this constituency finally displaced the Labour old guard and formed the basis of a radical left ruling group. The doubling of the size of the South Asian presence during the 1970s underlined that ethnic diversity was a permanent reality and, moreover, that it had reinvigorated the local economy at a time of recession. Thus, reflecting a radically altered discourse in key institutional spaces, during this period LCC set about reinventing Leicester as a multicultural success story. In 1979 (and then again in 1987) Leicester had returned three Labour MPs in the context of a national swing to the Tories, earning the nickname 'Red Leicester' (a pun on the name of the local cheese). Indeed, at a time when a Thatcherite central government was intent on extending its power over local councils and that of the market over urban policy (Lawless 1991: 25; Stoker and Wilson 1991), LCC was one of a number of left-wing Labour councils that (unsuccessfully) resisted Tory attempts to restrict their spending during the mid-1980s (cf. Westwood 1991: 151).

In his article cited in the introduction, Singh makes the observation that the Labour council mobilized the Asian vote and co-opted community groups as gatekeepers through its high-level of commitment to inner-city grants after the 1981 riots (2006: 295; cf. Stoker and Wilson 1991). Once a 'racist city', the Labour council now spent 10 per cent of its revenue budget on community associations (G. Singh 2006: 301) and the services they delivered, thus sustaining a strong

voluntary sector in the city. Failing council services were audited to better target the needs of ethnic minorities and there was an effort to increase their number amongst council employees (Winstone 1996). Even the Mercury was coming onside (Marett 1989: 169). Moreover, as Singh observes, having lost control of the council in 1976, 'The multicultural turn in Leicester's politics strengthened Labour's position, ushering in a one-party dominance' (2006: 294). While there had been Asian councillors in the city since 1969, having re-established themselves economically, East Africans and other Asians became more politically active, so that by 1983 there were nine councillors (all Labour) and a Tanzanian Asian Lord Mayor, Gordhan Devraj Parmar, was elected to serve in 1987-8. In 1987 Keith Vaz (Labour), who is of Goan heritage, was also elected as MP for Leicester East, becoming the UK's first Asian MP since 1923.

Singh's overall analysis of this political context is insightful but official documents which reflect Leicester's public celebration of cultural diversity as an attempt to secure civic unity, have not been much studied. However, a critical reading of a pamphlet produced by LCC's Living History Unit, *Parampara - continuing the tradition: Thirty years of Indian dance and music in Leicester* (Hyde et al. 1996),<sup>17</sup> begins to shed light on the ways in which this strategy sometimes unwittingly reproduced the particular versions of cultural authenticity advanced by community leaders and experts. Typical of the oral history genre, *Parampara* seeks to 'preserve' (1996: 6) the story of pioneering individuals and

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<sup>17</sup> *Parampara* is a Sanskrit term for the chain of knowledge passed from teacher to student.



organizations ‘in their own words’ (1996: back cover).<sup>18</sup> However, though it does relate interesting details going back to the 1960s and 1970s, what is striking is that the 1980s is presented as a moment of change for the better, with LCC funding ultimately enabling the teaching of normative traditions that had been ‘lost’.

Education was perhaps the most significant public arena for institutional performances of multiculturalism during the 1980s and Parampara related that in Leicester: ‘more schools began to introduce the celebration of traditional Indian festivals’ (1996: 15). Some Leicester schools were already 90 per cent Asian heritage in terms of their in-take and an unidentified respondent claims that they were ‘crying out’ for ways in which to address minority ethnic ‘cultural pride’ (1996: 16). Thus, in support of the celebration of Hindu festivals in school assemblies and Religious Education, and as part of a new approach to managing ethnic relations in the UK through accommodation and incorporation (cf. CCCS 1982), LCC invested heavily in the local infrastructure for Indian music and dance. This included the purchase of instruments and the employment of peripatetic teachers, animateurs and home liaison officers.

However, at this point in its story, Parampara gives a platform to the particular, if acutely felt, challenges facing teachers of the classical tradition of Indian dance. Indeed, the oral history project was suggested (and is introduced) by a Kathak dancer who came to Leicester in the early 1980s and set up her own centre before

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<sup>18</sup> Revealingly, it also welcomes synergies between ‘the city’s lively Asian cultural scene and economic development’ including tourism (1996: 5).

being employed by LCC. Precisely because it does not frame its material critically – and in contrast to the scholarly oral history of Herbert considered above - the LCC text fails to interrogate the council-funded efforts of a cultural leadership to normalize elite homeland aesthetics, spirituality and taste, even while embracing crossovers with elite Western music and dance. Rather than even-handedly examining the variety of ways in which dance is constructed by different Asian constituencies in Leicester, including those drawn mainly to folk (Garba and Raas/Dandiya) or filmi dance,<sup>19</sup> community ‘experts’ go unchallenged when they produce the cultural and linguistic ‘ignorance’ of the Gujarati, and especially the East African diaspora. Thus, it could be argued that LCC exercised a passive role in supporting attempts to ‘reinvent’ Indian tradition.<sup>20</sup>

Other texts relating to this era cast further critical light upon LCC’s attempts to manage cultural diversity through its public celebration and incorporation. These include the records of the City Council Planning Department (CCPD). In his 2003 research paper, *Understanding and Celebrating Religious Diversity: The Growth of Diversity in Leicester’s Places of Worship since 1970*, Richard Bonney dwells on the issue of ‘permanent change to the urban landscape resulting from the establishment of new places of worship’ (2003: 2). He notes that while between

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<sup>19</sup> The communal circling and clapping of Garba, and the dancing with sticks of Raas/Dandiya, respectively open and close the central rites of Navratri in the Vaisnavite religious tradition of bhakti (devotion). Fiercely contested competitions were held at large venues such as De Montfort Hall and Granby Halls from the mid-1970s (1996: 11). Even while a symbol of tradition, in its embodied performance dance is a site where hybrid identifications are negotiated, for instance, in the glamour, sensuality and easy improvisations of Bollywood filmi style, which also have a mainstream appeal (David 2010).

<sup>20</sup> ‘They know what is Raas and what is Garba but they wouldn’t know it was a folk dance ... people here who are from Africa, I think they have lost touch with India and they are not aware of this rich cultural heritage’ (1996: 24).

April 1974 and October 1976 only 10 per cent of all planning applications were refused in Leicester, the figure for religious buildings was 25 per cent but 60 per cent for applications from South Asian groups (2003: 30). While this evidenced discrimination unrecognized by the 1976 race relations legislation, such discrepancies also prompted a turning point in LCC attitudes in May 1977. Chief Planning Officer, John Dean, who notably fulfilled this leadership role continuously between 1974 and 1993, authorized a path-breaking report, *Places of Worship in Leicester*, which identified 220 congregations, 60 of which still did not have their own place of worship. However, with only 22 planning applications refused between 1974 and 1987, a decade later in 1987, it was possible for an updated report to reflect that ‘knowledge of religious groups had increased significantly’ in the city (Bonney 2003: 42-3).

Unfortunately, Bonney is unaware of the related doctoral work of human geographer, Richard Gale, who makes clear that: ‘in the course of a decade, the stance of the Council [in Leicester] underwent considerable revision, with the realization that exercises in teaching the law [to minorities] and setting restrictions would be incapable of containing the extensive demands for religious sites’ (1999: 61). Opposition to proposals was still in evidence, sometimes from intra-religious or caste (jati) groupings (Bonney 2003: 60), but the public recognition of faith in planning matters was ‘the first stage in an uneven trajectory towards what has ultimately become a positive relationship between the council and minority religious communities in the city’ (Gale and Naylor 2002: 401). Dwelling on the

case of the Leicester Jain Samaj (Society), which received two LCC grants towards the (non-religious ‘community’) costs of a new £500,000 Jain Centre project, Gale and his colleague, Simon Naylor, remark that:

Having made these funds available to the Jain Centre [which finally opened in 1988], the council began to perceive itself as having ‘bought in’ to the site ... the Centre is referred to in internal documents as exemplifying a ‘positive action’ initiative ... Similarly ... representatives of the local state made public statements of commitment to the site and its objectives ... that ... are closely redolent of the terms in which the Jains expressed their own public identity... Thus, a former mayor stated to the Leicester Mercury in 1985 that: ‘The Jain Centre is an honour for the whole of Leicester. It will attract visitors to the City. It will also be a community Centre open to everyone’ (Leicester Mercury, 26 August 1985). (Gale and Naylor 2002: 403)

Concerning this example of ‘successful’ political incorporation at work in Leicester’s celebrations of civic unity in cultural diversity, Gale and Naylor insightfully conclude that ‘the development of the Jain Centre involved a process of creating discursive common ground between the various actors involved’ (2002: 403). However, as another ‘back-story’ of successful multicultural Leicester demonstrates, the positioning of Jain leaders must be located not only vis-à-vis their most visible UK public patron (LCC) but also grassroots spaces and diasporic publics less visible (and less comprehensible) to the mainstream. Such matters are explored in two earlier ethnographic accounts in the social anthropological tradition (Banks 1991; 1994; see also 1992). Despite various critiques of the genre (CCCS 1982), such texts still illuminate layers of everyday lived realities that other disciplines often overlook. Ultimately, Marcus Banks shows that because of the tactical skill of the Jain Samaj President, a solicitor and direct migrant from Gujarat living away from the ethnic enclave, each one of three

donor constituencies attached quite different significance to symbolic space of the centre: i) for the local Srimali jati (caste), for whom this remained the key basis for solidarity, it was a hall for their communal functions; ii) for LCC, whose employees were ‘perplexed’ by the complexity of parochial caste divisions, it was a ‘community centre complete with crèche, restaurant and drop in centre for the unemployed’ (1991: 229); and iii) for Jain sponsors in Bombay and the Dutch diaspora, who valued the emphasis on vegetarianism, meditation and ahimsa or avoidance of violence, it was ‘an international study and meditation centre for furthering Jainism’ (Banks 1991: 229).

In revealing another of Asian Leicester’s ‘back-stories’, Banks shows that for all that LCC sought to strategically co-opt Jain leaders, the ‘tactics’ (cf. de Certeau 1984) of such leaders were in turn to co-opt the local state for their purposes and agendas too. Only ever partially successful, then, LCC’s attempts to incorporate different segments of Asian Leicester as part of an official multicultural consensus are also interrogated by sociologist, Sallie Westwood (1991), who’s chosen ethnographic site once again cuts deliberately across ethnic boundaries. Her ‘back-story’ is also politically engaged while realistic about the limits of scholarly representations: ‘to research and write about political struggle can have the effect of domesticating and de-politicising that struggle’ (1991: 146). Published, like one of Banks’ contributions, in *Black and Ethnic Leaderships*, a volume which crucially engaged multi-disciplinary ethnography with the power of the state, ‘Red Star over Leicester’ explores a ‘black’ youth project in Highfields for which

Westwood also acted as an adult education teacher and advocate (cf. Kalra 2006: 462). Following the 1981 riots, state and media discourses labelled assertive minority youth as a 'mob', politically rendering them 'objects rather than agents' (1991: 148). However, Westwood argues that, through their tactical engagement with LCC, Red Star FC created a degree of public censure against the ruling Labour group which 'claimed to govern a city with a large black population' yet was 'engaged in a very public row about resources for young black people' (1991: 164).

In the early 1980s Westwood shows that Red Star FC was resourced by LCC to the tune of around £100,000, establishing a premises with a client base of around 7-800 under the leadership of a young Panjabi Sikh Marxist activist. It encompassed young men of diverse Asian and African-Caribbean ethnic backgrounds and while localized experiences of lived difference (cf. Brah 1996: 192) were clearly apparent in 'ethnic jokes and name-calling' (Westwood 1991: 108), Westwood highlights the emergence of a strong consciousness of common 'black' experience, rights and solidarity. Temporarily re-appropriated from white working-class contexts of hooliganism and NF racism, the physicality and rituals of football became an expression of masculinity and multi-ethnic unity as Red Star FC travelled beyond Highfields to white areas and won away matches and trophies as well as the occasional fight. However, when the Labour council reviewed the use of the group's premises, the politicized youth responded by

occupying the building for several months from January 1984, action which required significant co-ordination and organizing.

Red Star FC eventually went en masse to LCC offices, too, paralysing the building and ‘bringing street style into the anonymous corridors of power’ (1991: 163). Yet, as Westwood argues, they also made tactical ‘recourse to the law [and] demonstrated to the local state and local politicians that Red Star FC was something more than a bunch of rowdies, that there was a willingness to fight on terrain not chosen and not initially understood’ (1991: 163). Members also joined the local Labour Party in large numbers, exercising an active if still disruptive citizenship to ensure that their leader was elected ward secretary. Tellingly, however, they were outmanoeuvred in their attempts to have him nominated for election as a councillor, the incumbent mobilizing white members of the party in an alliance with incorporated Asian elders ‘emphasising a Muslim identity at the expense of a black one’ (1991: 165).<sup>21</sup>

### Glocal Uncertainties and the Cohesive City: Beyond the Civic Brand to Cultural Critique

The representative from Leicester REC suggested that the image of the city as a successful ‘model’ of cohesion seemed to boil down to the absence of riots during 2001. However, a member of the Leicestershire Federation of Muslim Organisations (LFMO, established 1984) argued that good relations between a well-established network of leaders – some of whom shared East African connections - had made it possible to manage tensions peacefully including the local impact of Hindu-Muslim

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<sup>21</sup> The club was shut down in 1984 but re-emerged as Leicester Nirvana FC. See also Bains and Patel (1996) Asians Can’t Play Football at <http://www.kickitout.org/226.php> (18 October 2012).

violence in India during 2002. Moreover, when post '7/7' the British National Party (BNP) identified Muslims as the main threat to harmony in Leicester, he felt proud that Christians, Hindus and others had sprung to their defence.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, a locally-based historian of immigration offered a reminder that the city's public celebrations of cultural diversity, and community leaders' professions of unity, said very little indeed about the quality of citizens' interactions.

In 2001, summer riots by British Pakistani youth in the north of England and the subsequent events of '9/11' focused UK government attention upon the uncertainties and insecurities facing contemporary nation-states from the local to the global scale. Alongside a step-change in the regulation of transnational circulations, whether in terms of membership of suspected terrorist organizations or 'forced' marriages, the response of the New Labour government reasserted social cohesion over plurality, emphasizing anew the importance of citizens' responsibilities and 'shared values' (McLoughlin 2005). Its communitarian-influenced discourse thus marked a sharp contrast with 'old' Labour councils' accommodation of minority rights during the 1980s. The Home Office quickly established a number of policy reviews including one led by Ted Cattle who had previously worked for LCC at a senior level in housing (1988-90). Following visits to Leicester, as well as Southall and Birmingham (2001: 5), his final report highlighted that there were 'recurrent themes or practices which were present in [these] areas which did not experience disturbances' (2001: 15). Reiterating the city's own dominant institutional discourse, Leicester (along with Southall) was praised for a 'pride in their community'; 'diversity was seen as a positive thing'

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[http://www.bbc.co.uk/leicester/content/articles/2007/01/02/big\\_debate\\_leicester\\_in\\_harmony\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/leicester/content/articles/2007/01/02/big_debate_leicester_in_harmony_feature.shtml) (18 October 2012).



both in schools and public space more generally (2001: 15). Leaders were said to meet regularly for honest discussions, community policing was well developed and, moreover, the local press was identified as having ‘a very responsible attitude to these issues’ (2001: 17). Indeed, Mercury editor, Nick Carter, had convened the Leicester Multicultural Advisory Group (LMAG) for the first time in 2001, comprising LCC leadership, as well as individuals with a background in the police, LCF, the REC, universities and so on.

Despite the city’s undoubted success, I want to suggest that further investigation of the Mercury’s writing of contemporary Leicester further strengthens my suggestions in the previous section regarding the limitations of an institutional approach to managing social cohesion based mainly upon civic leadership and a celebratory public culture. Reflecting on his editorship of the newspaper since 1993, Carter, criticized ‘the [UK] media in failing to promote community cohesion ... as though they had no responsibility for the impact of their reporting on local communities’ (Guardian 19 January 2009). Serving both a city with a 40 per cent minority ethnic population and a county where non-white numbers were negligible, he professed that one part of his vision for a local newspaper in Leicester had been ‘to help these varied communities understand each other better’ (2009: 17). However, in their study of the Mercury, which is the biggest newspaper in the English Midlands, printing 70,000 copies six days a week, media scholars, Machin and Mayr, set Carter’s comments in the broader context of neoliberal transformations in the business of print journalism: ‘The big press

chains over the last 15 years have been streamlining the titles, reducing staff and changing content and style to better court advertisers ... This has meant closer relationships between marketing and journalism and also massive reliance on press releases and official sources' (2007: 458). Thus, as Carter himself elaborated in an address to Parliament (2003), his was a project combining moral responsibility with profitability: 'The moral reason is that a community will only welcome a newspaper that welcomes that community. The business reason is that large minority groups are important to advertisers and in a city like Leicester it is the Asian business sector that basically drives the local economy' (cited in Machin and Mayr 2007: 459).

So, in a move which effectively saw the Mercury mimic rather interrogate LCC's diversity strategy of celebration and incorporation, Carter 'decided that he should cease to cover any issue that might fuel conflict' in the city (2007: 459). Indeed, Machin and Mayr confirm that a discourse analysis from a sample of texts in 2005 found an array of multi-ethnic 'voices' reflected in the newspaper, and, despite ownership by the right of centre, Daily Mail, there was an absence of stories associated with the 'problems' of race and immigration. Nevertheless, the argument here is that the newspaper's support for cohesion is ultimately conservative. Like LCC, as a key institution in the city, the newspaper is involved in 'creating discursive common ground' (Gale and Naylor 2002: 403) between citizens. However, Machin and Mayr's conclusion is that the Mercury continues to dwell upon essentialized and 'surface' cultural differences, which tend to be

flagged in terms of ‘personalised’ content about festivals and cuisine based upon ‘good intention, friendliness and official unity’ (2007: 472). The emphasis here is on the need to ‘share’, ‘mix’ and ‘understand’. In 2005 at least, then, the commercially-oriented, ‘brand Leicester’, Mercury did not provide a critical space for, or take a lead in, the discussion of more difficult and profound issues underlying cultural difference, whether in terms of material disadvantage and equalities, or the capacity and desire for greater integration and civic engagement.

Leicester’s ‘brand’ was critiqued rather more sensationally when in his Manchester speech, ‘After 7/7: Sleepwalking to Segregation’ (22 September 2005), then Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) Chair, Trevor Phillips, paired it with Bradford in the north of England (cf. McLoughlin 2006), suggesting that the two were home to ‘ghettos’ comparable with Chicago or Miami. Revisiting the ‘residential isolation’ of British Asians as a particular barrier to cross-community mixing and so integration, he noted too that the leadership of soon to be ‘majority-minority’<sup>23</sup> cities such as Leicester (and Birmingham) would find reducing such isolation especially challenging.<sup>24</sup> LCC was very well aware of such issues, and had commissioned the report, *Taking Forward Community Cohesion in Leicester* (Improvement and Development Agency 2003). Emphasizing that ‘good community relations cannot be taken for granted’ (2003: 3) it went further to acknowledge the ‘potential for fear, mistrust, tension and

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<sup>23</sup> According to *The Guardian* (11 September 2007) Leicester will have no ethnic majority by 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Peach (2009, 2010) maintains that ‘ghettos’ simply do not exist in the UK (cf. Johnston et al. 2002).

conflict' (2003: 7). However, Phillips' (2005) speech also illuminated how, after '7/7', the conflation of local cohesion agendas with those of global security would become ever more intense in institutional discourse at the national level. Rather than Leicester's successful, middle-class Indians, it was the clustering of disadvantaged British Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in and around the mohalla of Highfields that Phillips (2005) highlighted as problematic (cf. Kalra and Kapoor 2009). Moreover, with the UK identified by the United States (US) as the centre of 'home-grown' terrorism in the West, Muslim Leicester has also found its apparent 'conservatism' the object of new institutional scrutiny on an international scale.<sup>25</sup>

A rare insight into the largely undocumented 'back-story' of Muslims in Leicester is the recent international monitoring report for the Open Society Institute (OSI)'s At Home in Europe<sup>26</sup> programme on Muslims in European cities.<sup>27</sup> Authored by the Policy Research Centre (PRC) at the Islamic Foundation (IF) just outside the city, its aim is not an in-depth portrait of the complexities of being Muslim in Leicester. Nevertheless, contesting the newly conflated institutional discourses of cohesion and securitization, it does highlight Muslims' strong national and

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<sup>25</sup> In October 2007 the US State Department's Senior Advisor for Muslim Engagement found the city to be 'the most conservative Islamic community she had ever seen in Europe ... the isolation of some parts ... was striking', <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/edwest/100074751/wikileaks-americans-call-leicester-the-most-conservative-islamic-community-in-europe/> (18 October 2012). See also 'New Islam in an Old English town', The New York Times, 30 October 2005.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/programs/at-home-in-europe-project/background> (accessed 18 October 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Apart from Vertovec's (1994) case study, Muslims in Leicester have not been much written about hitherto. They are generally associated with traditionalist Deobandi networks, which has made the city difficult for 'radicals' to penetrate as compared to Birmingham (Birt and Lewis 2010: 109-12).

especially local attachments. Notably, too, the OSI turned for local expertise and a model for its civil society values to a research unit at a ‘revivalist’ centre for Islamic education, research and publishing. Despite exposés of its Pakistani Jama’at-i Islami heritage (The Times 29 July 2004; The Telegraph 13 April 2008; cf. McLoughlin 2005), the IF was cited for ‘good practice’ by Cattle (2001: 67) and its British Muslim staff remained trusted partners of wider society on faith and cohesion matters, ‘actively working against Muslim isolationism ... [while adjusting (not unlike the Mercury) to] intellectual and commercial pluralism’ (Janson 2003: 363).

Muslims in Leicester reports, too, that, perhaps inevitably, counter-terrorism raids and arrests in Leicester since ‘7/7’, as well as reporting in the national media, have had a negative impact on hitherto good relations between civic and community leaderships in the city (2010: 19). In 2003, mainly Muslim mobilization against New Labour’s ‘War on Terror’ in Iraq and Afghanistan prompted a significant, if temporary, electoral swing to the Liberal Democrats, with LCC ceasing to be ‘Red’ for the first time since 1979.<sup>28</sup> Notably, the council subsequently sought to manage the stigma of Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) as a cohesion-cum-security policy focused, for the first time in the UK, entirely on Muslims as ‘Muslims’; in Leicester the agenda was renamed ‘Mainstreaming Moderation’ (2010: 20). However, given the historic importance of community grants to processes of political co-option in the city, amongst some

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<sup>28</sup> However, no party held overall control and Labour won a landslide in 2007 which was further consolidated in 2011.

non-Muslims, there has been resentment at the resources and attention Muslims have received (2010: 20, 126-5). As Birt (2009) argues elsewhere, PVE has also come to mean ‘Promoting Virulent Envy’ and this may be especially pronounced in a city like Leicester where Muslims have not historically been the largest minority faith grouping. The report’s recognition that, for all its achievements in terms of gatekeeping religio-ethnic tensions in the city, ‘the inter-faith ethos’ of a civic public culture in Leicester ‘has yet to penetrate into all sectors of society’ (2010: 126) is surely understated to say the least and has been critiqued rather more bluntly elsewhere drawing upon evidence from cross-community oral history (cf. Hussain et al. 2007, *The Intercultural State*).<sup>29</sup> The comments of a local respondent cited in the report are more unambiguous: “I think it’s getting worse, certainly the difficulty between the Hindu community with the Muslim community, the Sikh community and the Muslim community ... I know there’s a lot of tension” (2010: 46).

A more in-depth characterization of the ‘back-story’ of intra- and inter-ethno-religious tensions at the grassroots (cf. Brah 1996: 192) – though from the perspective of working-class and more upwardly-mobile Sikhs rather than Muslims – is to be found in a rare fiction-based contribution to the writing of multi-Asian Leicester. Born in the city and raised in a Jat heritage family, which migrated directly from India, Bali Rai often sets his novels for young adults around Highfields and Evington where he grew up, as well as out towards more

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<sup>29</sup> Otherwise, *The Intercultural State* is largely tainted with nostalgia and problematic interpretations.

affluent Oadby. In (un)arranged marriage (2001), Rani & Sukh (2004), The Last Taboo (2006) and Killing Honour (2011), he plots storylines which sometimes shift back and forth in time and space to the 1960s or 1970s and to the towns and villages of Indian Panjab. However, the drama is always focused upon the cultural contestation that emerges in Jat Sikh heritage school-leavers' most intimate relationships: a proposal of marriage that is 'unarranged' (2001); love and a pregnancy across two feuding Jat Sikh families from the same village in Panjab (2004); a black/Asian 'mixed race' relationship (2006); and the search for a disappeared sister who is falsely accused of leaving her marriage for a Muslim (2011). If other 'back-stories' in this chapter emphasize struggles to recover status and tactical engagement with attempts to manage diversity, what Rai's account offers is an open and deliberately transgressive celebration of cultural hybridity, paired with uncompromising social criticism (cf. Werbner 2004; Alexander 2008). On his blog he insists that 'Nothing is taboo'.<sup>30</sup> With a nod to official narrations of civic unity in diversity, the twin concerns of his quartet of Asian Leicester novels are explained thus:

I wanted to ... reflect the uniqueness of Leicester as Europe's most multicultural city ... I love the way that non-white English people have redefined what it means to come from this country and added their own take on everything from fashion to food to music and film. We should be proud of that whilst at the same time open and honest about the issues that face us as a community.<sup>31</sup>

One of the issues that Rai wants to be 'open and honest about' is a concern with family honour (izzat) which his teenage protagonists in Leicester experience as

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<sup>30</sup> [http://balirai.blogspot.com/2010\\_10\\_01\\_archive.html](http://balirai.blogspot.com/2010_10_01_archive.html) (18 October 2012).

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.balirai.co.uk/page15.htm> (18 October 2012).

the parochial, conservative and forceful expression of domestic power relations. Manifest in rumours, fear, public shame, and attempts at control, revenge and even murder, in blunt teenage language the corporatist values and norms of Jat ‘tradition’ are described as ‘stupid’ (2001: 182) and ‘bullshit’ (2011: 26). The pluralistically-minded heroes and heroines of Rai’s Leicester novels all face insults and attack for ‘not stickin’ wid your own’ (2004: 33). Stock ‘bhangramuffin’ characters brand them *gorehs* (whites) or ‘coconuts’. Indeed, prejudice against ‘outsiders’ - be they *goreh* or *kaleh* (blacks), *chamars* (a Dalit sub-caste) or ‘Pakis’ / ‘soollah’<sup>32</sup> (Muslims) – is Rai’s other main target, something that enrages the protagonists and that they find impossible to explain, much less justify, to non-Panjabi heritage peers.

Nevertheless, for Rai’s main characters, the neighbourhoods of Asian Leicester are very positively identified ‘home’ space. Multi-ethnic mixing is ‘brilliant’ (2001: 47) and of all the writing considered in this chapter, Rai’s literary narratives most successfully bring to life everyday lived difference, placed affect and street level cosmopolitanism (cf. Vertovec and Cohen 2002). Here, the best friends and boy/girl-friends of the protagonists are just as likely to be black or white as Panjabi heritage (though never Muslim); characters of diverse ethnicities negotiate and share a hybridized repertoire of subcultural aesthetics and style from ‘bad bwoi’ street patois to urban music. In a recent ‘Q&A’ Rai roots this in his own experiences growing up, though it is unclear to what extent this truly reflects

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<sup>32</sup> Presumably from Rasool Allah, the Prophet of God, i.e. Muhammad.



contemporary Leicester or his own nostalgia: ‘As a kid I didn’t see differences first. My mates and I were just British kids from different backgrounds, all growing up together’ (2011: 320). In *The Last Taboo* (2006), fictionalized recollections of unified black and pan-Asian opposition against the NF during the 1970s and 1980s also presage Rai’s contemporary public support for Sikhs Against the EDL (English Defence League),<sup>33</sup> this in the context of the far-right, anti-Muslim movement’s recruitment of a small number of Sikh heritage individuals.

Though many of his characters’ critiques of narrow ethnic loyalties appeal to liberal and secularized values, and his oeuvre generally reveals ‘his culture’ only as a problem to the mainstream, it is significant that Rai also invokes ‘religion’ both as a tool of everyday critique as well as a resource to imagine broader unities. In (un)arranged marriage, the challenge to those who reinforce clan loyalties with appeals to religion is sometimes painfully simplistic and judgmental: ‘they weren’t real Sikhs: real Sikhs wore turbans and didn’t drink alcohol’ (2001: 87). However, Manny’s use of religion in the novel’s postscript as a means of qualifying, and perhaps belatedly repositioning, the often one-dimensional rage of the book at all things Panjabi is more interesting:

I disrespected the temple and the Sikh religion and I never meant to do that ... I’ve been reading up on it lately and I’ve found that Sikhism preaches tolerance and equality towards everyone, a bit like an Asian version of Christianity ... The problem is that people like my old man tie in all these old traditions to the religion – arranged marriages, all that racist shit, the

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.turbancampaign.com/updates/bali-rai-why-i-support-sikhs-against-edl/> (18 October 2012). An EDL ‘static demonstration’ was held in Leicester on 9 October 2010 after a march through Highfields was banned.

caste system stuff, things which are nothing to do with religion and more to do with culture and politics and social norms. (2001: 269-270)

Despite the clichés, here the disaggregation of ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ reflects the way in which South Asian diaspora youth have re-appropriated a typically revivalist discourse of purification for both religious and more strategic and instrumental purposes. In social spheres where appeals to ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity’ may still have most valency, arguments in a religious vernacular do have the potential to trump custom and liberate spaces for self-identity in a way that liberal, secular vernaculars may not. However, as the failed interventions of the gyanis (spiritual leaders) on behalf of Rani and Sukh (2004) illustrate, there is no guarantee of success in this regard. At the same time, and perhaps shedding further light on the present saliency of notions of multi-faith convergence taken up in Leicester’s civic culture (cf. Baumann 1999: 126), ‘Sikhism’ is also operationalized by Manny as another way to strive for common norms from within the particular cultural formation of his Panjabi heritage. In Bruce Robbins’ words, cosmopolitanism must be built up from within ‘situated collectivities’ and ‘actually existing’ idioms (1998: 1).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to better contextualize, complicate and critique the institutional rhetoric concerning Leicester as a ‘successful’, multicultural and multi-Asian city. Adopting a novel approach, this has been achieved by assessing some of the main ways in which Asian Leicester has been

‘written’ during the last four decades. Apart from the general buoyancy of the city’s economy, two factors are normally said to have been crucial in Leicester’s reputation as a ‘model’ of multiculturalism: i) the successful management of significant ethno-religious diversity by a stable, Labour-run local council; and ii) the outward-looking orientation and social capital / mobility of East African Asian ‘twice migrants’. Attentive to changing institutional discourse from the 1970s until the present day, I have firstly been able to show that, responding to Leicester’s location in regional, national and international fields of power (Schiller and Çağlar 2011), whether in terms of changing demographics, new race relations legislation, a re-structuring of the economy or, most recently, the impact of global uncertainties, the discourses of LCC and the local Mercury newspaper have shifted considerably in this period. From indifference and rejection, these key Leicester institutions have moved towards the co-option, containment and commodification of Asian-ness, with the city’s ‘brand’ for successful diversity management ‘creating discursive common ground’ (Gale and Naylor 2002: 403) in public spaces and across an incorporated community leadership. Secondly, I have shown that, to a greater or lesser extent, texts in oral history, ethnography and literature, can significantly qualify civic narratives of success. What I have called the ‘back-stories’ of Asian Leicester bring forth underlying complexity and depth concerning the ‘lived experience of a locality’ (Brah 1996: 192). These discrepant representations of Asian Leicester’s story recall the painful struggles of women to recover their middle-class status following expulsion from East Africa, the tactical engagement of community leaders with council efforts to incorporate

them, and some young people's vehement critiques of persisting ethno-religious polarization at the grassroots. Here, the constrained situations within which power is short-circuited are illuminated (cf. de Certeau 1984).

Moving flexibly back and forth across texts written from different positions as I do here is also one way of further exploring Brah's (1996: 16) notion of 'diasporic space' as a location constituted by both 'diasporas' and that which is 'represented as indigenous'. While institutional discourse reflects the ambivalences of recognizing as well as fetishizing minority 'culture' in a city which 'owns' its Asian-ness more positively than most, attention to spaces of everyday dwelling begins to displace an ethnic lens with attention to intersections of class, gender and generation. The diasporic space of Asian Leicester thus emerges at different scales 'below' the imagined communities of the city and the nation, from classic zones of transition and 'respectable' working class areas, to the suburbs and the countryside. The 'lived experience of a locality' (Brah 1996: 192) inevitably occupies the foreground in the accounts examined here, whether in terms of the knitwear factories in which Asian women of petty bourgeois background have laboured alongside their white, working class colleagues, or the streets where new subcultures and meanings of style are forged by multi-ethnic youth. However, 'above' and 'beyond' the city and the nation, inferences of the 'distinct historical experiences of a diaspora' (Brah 1996: 179) still illuminate how, dynamically and contextually, Asian Leicester is also trans-temporally and multi-locally configured. This might be in terms of the on-going emotional hold of East Africa

on the consciousness of its now ageing expellees, flows of capital to Leicester  
Jains from their co-religionists overseas, the voting behaviour of Muslims during  
the ‘War on Terror’ or the efficacy of family feuds in the villages of Indian  
Panjab. Given this layering of the multi-Asian cityscape of Leicester, labels such  
as British Asian or even BrAsian (Kaur and Kalra 1996; Sayyid 1996) quickly  
lose their valency.

Analysing the key texts writing Asian Leicester side by side enables a new, more  
nuanced and complex social, cultural and political history of the city to emerge,  
even if it inevitably remains provisional and ‘full of holes’ (Clifford and Marcus  
1986: 7). The gaps and silences revealed are many but perhaps most obvious in  
terms of literary output in English, with Rai the sole contributor in this regard.  
Despite some excellent accounts of women’s experiences, the story of the  
Belgrave Behano remains largely un-documented.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the political  
economy of production, target audiences and author standpoint are all factors that  
locate texts very differently. Many accounts of Asian Leicester have been written  
by those with personal as well as professional investments in the life of the city,<sup>35</sup>  
but inevitably all the work discussed here represents only partial truths. So, while  
oral history produced as part of state multiculturalism / the heritage industry has  
usefully documented individuals’ life stories in relation to the powerful forces of  
history (Hyde et al. 1996; Hussain et al. 2007; Law et al. 2009), limited self-

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<sup>34</sup> But see  
[http://www.thecolourofhealth.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=154&Itemid=27](http://www.thecolourofhealth.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=154&Itemid=27)  
(19 October 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Those from, living or working in Leicester at the time of writing their texts include Westwood,  
Marett, Rai, Bonney and G. Singh.

awareness about the location of these accounts tends to undermine their ability to fashion ‘true fictions’ (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 6-7; cf. Herbert 2008a). Similarly, perhaps because he is writing mainly for a ‘mainstream’ audience, Rai’s (2001; 2004; 2006; 2011) quartet of novels illuminates the vernacular cosmopolitanism of his young protagonists but not the dynamics of continuing attachment to homeland Panjabi culture amongst other Leicester Jat Sikhs. Some, like Westwood’s (1984; 1991) socialist / feminist ethnography, exhibit a more ‘rigorous partiality’ in their work (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 25), both in terms of being more reflexive and more critically aware. Thus, the knowledge produced across all these genres remains ‘complex, often ambivalent, [but] potentially counter-hegemonic’ (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 9).

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