Migration to Britain from South Asia, 1600s–1850s

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Abstract

Men and women from South Asia (what would become India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal) have chosen to settle in the British Isles since the early seventeenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century, tens of thousands had arrived, some remaining permanently, more returning home. Their complex and often contested relationships with the native British population shifted with the onset and expansion of imperialism. Early settlers had experiences different from those of their successors during the high-colonial and post-colonial periods. This article considers the historiography about the diverse early South Asian settlers in Britain – the disparate sources available in several languages and how various historians and other commentators have represented these sources and these settlers both. Given the current political, cultural, and social tensions concerning Asians in multicultural Britain, we would do well to understand this early history in its contemporary terms as well as in our own.

People from South Asia reached England on the earliest returning ships of the East India Company (founded 1600). Over the next 250 years, tens of thousands of men and women with different regional, linguistic, and religious backgrounds ventured from South Asia to Britain. They included sailors, male and female servants and slaves, as well as royalty, diplomats, officials, merchants, soldiers, scholars, and the wives/mistresses of Europeans. While many returned home after a season or more in Britain, those who settled during this early period generally Anglicized: marrying a Briton of his/her economic class, joining a Christian parish, and taking an English-style name. Their lives bind colony and metropole into the same analytic frame, highlighting migration and agency in ways opposed to more conventional Anglocentric histories of the British empire. Yet, these settlers and their descendants have been defined, recorded, and represented variously by official bodies, scholars, and themselves.

A well-developed historiography has demonstrated how Britons identified themselves in changing ways over these two-and-a-half centuries, but what it meant to be “Asian” or “Indian” in Britain also shifted dramatically, reflecting developments in Asia, Europe, and their “connected history.” In 1600, few people in England had considered what being Asian really meant,
giving early settlers some scope for self-representation. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, Britain’s spreading world empire had created an arena where Britons might daily encounter a range of (apparently indistinguishable) “foreigners.” Consequently, Indians repeatedly wrote with amusement about how the naive native British public misidentified them. For example, in 1841, Parsi men from Bombay (thinking themselves attired in the clearly identifying traditional cap and robes of their own small ethnic community) described how in London’s Regent’s Park: “It was amusing to hear one call us Chinese, they are Turks says another; no they are Spanish, vociferates a third; thus they were labouring under mistakes, and taking inhabitants of British India for natives of Europe.” Nonetheless, Asians by then faced prevalent, and often derogatory, British popular images of them as “other.”

Nor were British authorities in London over this period clear or consistent about who – exactly or legally – was a “native of India.” Parliament included everyone domiciled within the East India Company’s Charter: all lands from South Africa to the Philippines. Until 1834 (when Parliament suspended the Company’s Charter to trade in Asia), the Company’s directors challenged that definition, since they had to feed, shelter, and repatriate all indigent “Indians” in Britain and also since they wanted to exclude “Indians” from high (“covenanted”) appointments. Instead, the Directors in individual cases inconsistently used their own variable criteria, including: place of birth or of domicile, paternal ancestry or maternal, skin colour, religion, economic status, first/native language, or type of education (or, occasionally, simply bureaucratic expediency or financial or political cost). Thus, some people of mixed ancestry in Britain continued to be classified as “Indian,” others did not. On their part, settlers maneuvered among and evaded inhospitable popular and official efforts to define them, even as they created new lives for themselves and their descendants in Britain.

Each body of surviving source material about or by South Asian settlers also reflects particular aspects of their lives. Extensive evidence exists in colonial archives, particularly those of the East India Company in London (in the British Library’s Oriental and India Office Collection) and India (in New Delhi’s National Archive and various provincial archives). For example, financial bonds (which the East India Company required 1769–1857 for all Indian servants going to Britain as security against the costs of repatriation) and ship’s logs identified many thousand working-class Asian men and women. As scholars have discussed, however, such archives necessarily represent “the colonizer’s” selective construction of “the colonized.” Indeed, these records labeled many people as designated by their British masters, for instance as “Black female servant” or with an imposed name like “Caesar.” Other settlers, however, like the four Indians employed (1806–23) as professors at the East India Company’s colleges in England (at Haileybury and Addiscombe, two with higher salaries than their colleague Thomas Malthus), left voluminous and highly articulate letters, papers, petitions, publications, and other autobiographical accounts, in English and Persian.
Hundreds of Asians came to London seeking to reshape British colonial policies (testifying as expert witnesses before Parliamentary committees and other official bodies, lavishly paying politicians, and addressing the public directly through speeches and newspaper articles); dozens stayed for decades or the rest of their lives. Therefore, the relationships of individual settlers toward colonial authorities varied widely, as do the extent and type of materials preserved in colonial record rooms.

Evidence also appears in sources not directly related to their Asian colonial origins. British tax records, public directories, and the national death register, for example, sought comprehensiveness, treating people born in Asia but owning or renting houses in Britain or dying there much like everyone else. British censuses (1841 onward) also sought universal inclusion, although foreign birth was noted. Churches documented christenings, marriages, and deaths of all their parishioners and provided relief for their indigent, occasionally but not always mentioning Asian ancestry. Judicial records, like the Old Bailey’s Proceedings, recorded identities and took testimony, only irregularly noting if a plaintiff, defendant, or witness was from Asia.\(^3\)

Newspaper articles and advertisements often mixed Asians with other Britons, but also occasionally identified them as “Asiatic,” “East Indian,” “Oriental,” “Orientalist,” or “Black.”

English arts have long traditions of representing Asians, either as developed individuals or as abstract types. Artists from the seventeenth century onward — including Anthony Van Dyck, Joshua Reynolds, Peter Lely, and George Stubbs — painted or drew Asians in Britain from life, with their physiognomy, location, clothing, and poses (as negotiated from different positions of power by them, the artist, and the patron) suggesting their social roles and also individual personalities. Some illustrators, however, also used “Blacks” as stereotyped by domestic British culture.\(^4\) Indeed, Nabil Matar critiques commentators who presuppose that stock Black figures in English fiction — dramas, poems, and novels — reflected the actual lives, perspectives, or receptions of Muslims or other Asians in England.\(^5\)

Some settlers wrote autobiographically; visiting Asian authors also noted them. Their varied intended readerships, however, shaped their works. In a striking instance, Sake Dean Mahomet (1759–1851), the famous “Shampooing Surgeon” of Brighton, self-publicized widely, repeatedly recreating his life in books and pamphlets, sartorially, and in commissioned portraits for British audiences and potential patients.\(^6\) Asian visitors who met him and other settlers provided quite different perspectives in the half-dozen books they wrote in Asian languages for Asians.\(^7\)

Growing numbers of scholars and other commentators have situated these settlers and their families within larger frameworks. Throughout, one of the key issues remains definitional: who is “Asian” and who becomes “British”? Mark Harrison and others have demonstrated how British notions of “race” shifted over this 250 year period from largely changeable criteria like religious identity or domicile to more inflexible biologically determined grounds.\(^8\)
Thus, early settlers and their descendants who chose to assimilate had some self-definitional fluidity. Later Asians increasingly reported encountering more exclusive British stereotypes, especially following the bloody fighting of 1857 (variously called the “Sepoy Mutiny” or “First War for Indian Independence”), the 1865 “race” conflict in Jamaica, spreading “high colonialism,” and the development of pseudo-scientific interpretations of social Darwinism. Contemporary British social reformers and evangelicals developed ethno-sociologies and racial hierarchies which assessed Asians. For example, in the late 1850s, Henry Mayhew surveyed and interviewed Asians, particularly those living in London’s streets, slums, and burgeoning “Oriental Quarter” of east London’s docklands. He identified (by inter alia “head shape”) competing “races”: the vagrant race (composed of wanderers, vagabonds, and nomads, including Asians, Jews, the Irish, and costermongers) which preyed upon the English civilized “race” of settled, working citizens.

For the most part, these settlers have never been included in the national narratives of either the new South Asian nations or Britain. Occasionally, twentieth-century Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi nationalists have commemorated a few prominent compatriots in Britain, often cast as early anti-imperialist agitators. Only quite recently have less prominent settlers in Britain drawn the attention of scholars of Post-colonialism (particularly analysts of Indian Anglophone literature), the Indian Diaspora (enhanced by new awareness of globalization), and Indian Labour History (concerning the tens of thousands of British-bound Asian seamen). For the most part, these settlers have never been included in the national narratives of either the new South Asian nations or Britain. Occasionally, twentieth-century Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi nationalists have commemorated a few prominent compatriots in Britain, often cast as early anti-imperialist agitators. Only quite recently have less prominent settlers in Britain drawn the attention of scholars of Post-colonialism (particularly analysts of Indian Anglophone literature), the Indian Diaspora (enhanced by new awareness of globalization), and Indian Labour History (concerning the tens of thousands of British-bound Asian seamen). In these contests, activists have written “White” or “Black” British history in light of their own interests, often mapping today’s understandings of race and community onto the past.

Since the 1970s, committed writers, who oppose anti-immigrant advocates of White British history, have sought to recuperate the hitherto unrecognized history of accomplishments and contributions of a distinctive Black community in Britain, including all people of Asian and African descent (although people of mixed ancestry are more problematic). As Ron Ramdin argues, Black is a “political colour.” In these contests, activists have written “White” or “Black” British history in light of their own interests, often mapping today’s understandings of race and community onto the past.

More recently, some scholars have focused on particular groups of settlers or related them more toward either British or Indian history. Among these, Rozina Visram has compiled particularly thorough and extensive documentation about Asian settlers and their descendants, stressing their place in British history. Others have taken a more India-centered perspective.
The 1600s–1850s period considered here holds similarities with today’s post-modern negotiation and contestation through multiple and context-sensitive identities. People in Britain today who identify themselves, or are identified by the government or society at large, as “Asian” are also marked by various combinations of religious (Muslim, Hindu, Sikh), regional (e.g., Punjabi, Bengali, Tamil, East African), and national origin (Indian, Pakistani, etc.). Gender and class often cross-cut national and ethnic communities, and power inequalities divide. Current high rates of intermarriage and the cosmopolitan cultural diversity available complicate ideas about fixed race and essentialized cultural heritage. Can people choose to be British with or without a hyphen; do they have one history or many? Further, the often destructively violent politico-religious movements within Britain must be understood in dialogue with those within South Asia. Thus, the complex careers and identities of these early settlers enable us to understand more deeply the multifaceted historiographies of Britain, South Asia, and the transnational relationships between them, even as they challenge comfortable classifications.

Notes

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1 There were also many Asians in Britain from outside of South Asia. This article follows today’s British usage where Asian means South Asian, rather than contemporary American usage of Asian for East Asian. This article only attempts to deal with settlers from South Asia not people from other Asian lands. For an Asian-centered argument see S. Subrahmanyam, Explorations in Connected History, 2 vols. (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2004).


3 “Foreign” criminal defendants collectively, however, were entitled to a jury at least half of their peers (i.e., other foreigners, regardless of homeland). British courts were very concerned about religion, and evolved creative ways to swear in non-Christians. See also www.oldbaileyonline.org, The Old Bailey Proceedings Online.


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7 For example, scholar-official Abu Talib Khan Isfahani (1752–1806) wrote Masir Talibi fi Bilad Afnajji in Persian and diplomat Karim Khan (b. 1811) composed his “Siya
hatnama” in Urdu.


11 For example, respectively about Rungo Bapojee (1804–57) and Azimullah Khan (c. 1830–58) see B. D. Basu, The Story of Satana, ed. R. Chatterjee (Calcutta, Modern Review Office, 1922); S. Lutfullah, Azimullah Khan Yusufzai, the Man Behind the War of Independence, 1857 (Karachi, Moham


16 Ramdin, *Reimagining Britain*, p. x.


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Migration to Britain from South Asia, 1600s–1850s

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