

# Picturing Punjabi Migration Experiences in the Black Country

The origin of the Punjabi migrants of the Black Country traces back to the region of Punjab in South Asia. Occupied by the British empire in 1849, it regained its independence in 1947. In the same year it was also violently divided between the states of Pakistan and India.

Some Punjabis immigrated to Britain already in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. But their number increased following World War II (1939-1945), because the UK had a serious shortage of manual workers. The country needed such workers to run transport networks, to improve the National Health Service (NHS), to make new buildings, and to help produce items that people needed or just wanted.

To resolve the problem, during the post-war period the British government actively invited foreign nationals to come to work in the UK, especially people from the former territories of the British Empire, known as the Commonwealth of Nations.

Many Punjabi men responded to the call. After they settled in their new country, they invited their families and friends to join them, not least as the UK still needed more workers. Punjabis are now the largest ethnic group of British Asians and one of the most educated and successful community in the UK.



## SOURCE 1

Victoria Memorial, c 1974. Prem Pal and family.

Queen Victoria became Empress of India in May 1876 and ruled the subcontinent until her death in January 1901. Shortly after her passing, the British governor of India, Lord Curzon, wanted to commemorate the Queen by constructing a grand memorial hall and vast gardens in Kolkata, which was India's capital city at the time. Building works began in 1906 and the memorial was formally opened to the public in 1921. The memorial hall was built of white marble and it was designed to combine British and Islamic architectural styles. The garden areas around the hall covers 57 acres, featuring statues of Queen Victoria, King Edward VII, and other known historical British figures. King George V of Britain moved the capital city of India to Delhi in 1911. But to this day, there is no monument to a British monarch larger than the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata.

1. Look at the photograph in Source 1 and read its accompanying text.

- Focusing on the text first, what was the nature of the relationship between Britain and India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries?
- What do you think we may learn from the photograph about the approach of Indian society towards Britain in the second half of the 20th century?

Sources in this activity handout show photographs taken from family photo albums of people who immigrated to the United Kingdom between the 1950s and the 1980s. More specifically, these people came to the UK from Punjab in northern India, and they settled in the Black Country.

Family photo albums are personal collections of photographs that people keep at home. Usually, they contain pictures showing people, places and moments of importance to their owners, including ancestors, other relatives, friends, pets, holidays, and celebrations. Some people keep their family photos organised in blank books, known as photo albums. Others keep them more loosely, in drawers, shoeboxes, or plastic bags. Either way, family photo albums tend to be valuable objects that people pass on from one generation to another. Nowadays many keep their family photo albums as digital files on their computers.

The meanings of the photographs in this handout may not be clear instantly. You will be guided to consider them as historical evidence about key moments that Punjabi migrants experienced during the first few decades of their lives in the UK. To be able to treat the photographs as historical evidence, you will need to look at them very carefully and read the text accompanying them with an equal level of attention.



**SOURCE 2**

Heathrow Airport, c 1960. Roshan Jain.

2. Look at Source 2.

- Name everything you see in the picture.
- Thinking of what people usually show in family photographs, why do you think someone decided to keep this photograph in their family photo album?

### Activity

Looking at Source 2, imagine that you are one of the people in the photograph and that you are starting a new journal to document the beginning of your life in the UK.

**Option 1:** Write your first entry about your arrival in the country. Focus on why you came here and your first impressions about the things that you see around when you leave the airport on your way to the Black Country. Write a paragraph, checking spelling and using clear handwriting.

**Option 2:** Storyboard some of the experiences that you encounter while making your way to the Black Country. Use 6 or 7 frames and add some brief captions to help others to follow the story.

Consider the things that make you happy, the things that make you sad, and the things that you find difficult or confusing. You may want to think about things like transportation, food, architecture, shops, your sense of direction, language, accents and people's manners.



Punjabi migrants who came to the Black Country between the 1950s and 1970s took up vacant jobs in industry, construction and business. The jobs they did helped them to make a living, support and provide for their families, and build a whole new life for themselves altogether. In doing so, they simultaneously contributed to making British society much more productive, stronger and wealthier.

In fact, Punjabi migrants became well-known for being exceptionally hard-working people. Apart from dedicating a lot of their time to the jobs they were doing, they also did not shy away from any available job, no matter how time-consuming or physically demanding it might have been.



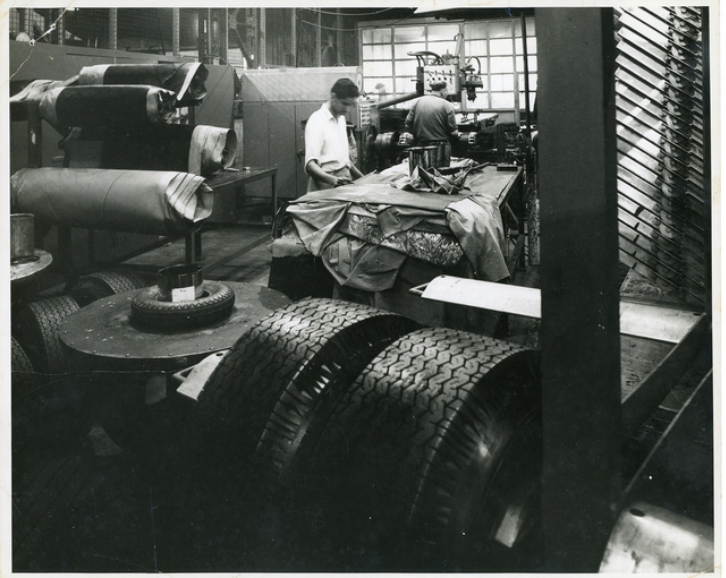
**SOURCE 4**

Inkerman St, Wolverhampton, c 1961. Amro, Kanta and Sawran Dass.



**SOURCE 6**

Rayleigh Rd, Wolverhampton, c 1970. Anoop Grewal with Karam Singh Purba.



**SOURCE 3**

Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. Stafford Rd, Wolverhampton, c 1961.



**SOURCE 5**

Old Fallings Crescent, Wolverhampton, c 1968. Amro Dass with Kanta, Semetra, Pamela, Sheila and friends.

3. Work in pairs to explore sources 3-18. Drawing on the visual evidence, discuss what hopes and aspirations you think Punjabi migrants had for their future when they moved to the UK. You may want to consider:

- the sites and backgrounds they chose to pose against;
- the people they are with;
- the clothes they wear;
- the ornaments and decorations they had around the house;
- the purpose of the objects that they chose to include in the pictures.





**SOURCE 7**

Pub, Wolverhampton, c 1971.  
Harbans Lal and family.



**SOURCE 9**

Bingley School. Norfolk Rd, Wolverhampton,  
c 1973.



**SOURCE 11**

Leslie Road, Wolverhampton, c 1978.  
Ram Rakha with family.



**SOURCE 8**

Elm St, Wolverhampton, c 1972.  
Shobha and Sally.



**SOURCE 10**

Thetford, Norfolk, c 1973. Param Jeet Bhagotra  
with colleagues.



**SOURCE 12**

Dudley, c 1979. Rajinder Singh Sohi and family.





### SOURCE 13

Delta Flow Ltd. Bartholomew St, Digbeth, Birmingham, c 1979.



### SOURCE 15

Penn Rd, Wolverhampton, c 1982.  
Surinder on dholki.



### SOURCE 17

Hindu Temple, Birmingham, c 1987.  
Param Jeet Bhagotra and family.



### SOURCE 14

Rayleigh Rd, Wolverhampton, c 1979.  
Gurdev Kaur with family.



### SOURCE 16

Buckingham Palace, London, c 1986.  
Bhajan Kaur and family.



### SOURCE 18

Benjamin Parkes & Son Ltd. Tipton, 1989.  
Ravinder Kaur Chana.

## Activity

When the Punjabi migrants arrived in the Black Country not everyone liked having them around and their racial abuse gradually became relatively common.

1. Look once again at Sources 2-18 and consider why in your opinion some people might not have been so welcoming towards the migrants.
2. Share your thoughts with your friends.
3. Now, imagine you are the organiser of an anti-racism protest. Design three banners with statements stressing how the migrants contributed to the lives and livelihood of people in the Black Country. Aim to come up with short, catchy and informative statements.

## Self-reflection

I think it is important to remember what I learnt today because ...

*Picturing Punjabi Migration Experiences in the Black Country* is the result of a collaborative project between **Anand Chhabra** (Black Country Visual Arts — BCVA) who received a Project Grant for research and development from Arts Council England (ACE) and **Gil Pasternak** (Photographic History Research Centre at De Montfort University) who received Participatory Research funding from UKRI — UK Research and Innovation.

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