

# Indians in Britain<sup>1</sup>

Stephen Castles

University of Oxford, UK

## Abstract

*This paper gives a brief account of the formation of Indian diaspora in Britain. Migration of Indians to Britain started as a result of the colonial relationship going back several centuries. The process moved on by temporary labour migration and then by family reunion. The most recent stream of migration is that of medical practitioners, students and due to marriage. In spite of various immigration restrictions and nationality laws for controlling migration for several decades, Indians became the largest minority group in Britain (one million, according to Census 2001). The approach of the British state towards the issue of migrants' integration has been changing from 'race relations' to 'multiculturalism' to the 'social cohesion'. In this context, the evolution of Indian associations in Britain had gone through several stages. A sizeable Indian civil society started to emerge in the 1960s, when religious, welfare and cultural organizations were set up by Indian settlers in Britain. At present religious and community self-help organisations constitute the largest group of Indian associations; the second largest being the welfare and educational organisations. Also, many organisations came up as a result of entanglement between religious and political spheres. The Indian diaspora, on the one hand, practice a high level of cultural and religious maintenance for displaying strong attachments to their ancestral homeland; on the other hand, it holds an important socio-economic position acquired through high educational achievement and labour market performance.*

**Keywords:** Commonwealth, Nationality Act, Britishness, National-identity, Race-relations, Ethnicity, Multiculturalism, Social cohesion, Diaspora, Assimilation, Diversity, Segregation.

## I. The Context of Indian Migration to Britain

The large-scale migration from Commonwealth countries after 1945 was closely linked to Britain's past as an imperial power. Emigration of British people as soldiers, sailors, administrators, planters and traders was a key aspect of domination. India was perhaps the most valuable part of the Empire, and had a profound effect on British politics, economics and society. The status of people of colonial territories as 'subjects' of the British Crown helped integrate the Empire, but was to open the door for mass migration after 1945, especially after the British Nationality Act of 1948, which conferred British citizenship on all who lived in the British Empire and Commonwealth.

It is important to realise that post-1945 immigration to Britain has always been diverse, including Irish, Europeans and people from all over the world – as well as people from the Commonwealth. Immigration of workers from the New Commonwealth (former British colonies in the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent and Africa) started after 1945. Some (mainly Caribbean) workers came as a result of recruitment by London Transport, but most migrated spontaneously in response to labour demand, and were able to enter freely as British

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citizens. In the late 1940s most migrants came from the Caribbean islands, while migration from India and Pakistan started after 1950 and peaked in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Immigration restrictions and changes in nationality law led to a shift from labour migration to family settlement in the 1960s and 1970s, and then to a decline in immigration overall. In the Thatcher era of de-industrialisation (the 1970s and 1980s), Britain pursued a highly restrictive policy on immigration. Entries were outweighed by British emigration to Australia, Canada and other countries. Then the economic boom from the mid-1990s led to new inflows of migrants and asylum seekers from all over the world. Net immigration of non-British persons increased from around 100,000 a year in the mid-1990s to 161,000 in 1998 and 225,000 by 2001 (ONS, 2003a, Table 2.1).

When the EU expanded in May 2004 to include 10 new member states, Britain was one of the only older EU states (with Ireland and Sweden) to immediately admit workers from the Accession States. Hundreds of thousands of workers from Poland, Czech Republic and other new member states were registered – although many had already been present in Britain as undocumented workers (Home Office, 2005). Immigration became an area of constant conflict and scandal, and opinion polls showed that it was now one of the main issues likely to affect voting decisions in parliamentary elections.

The new immigrants were highly diverse in origins. Top areas of origin for asylum seekers included Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, and China. Only one-third of new immigrants in 2001 came from either EU countries or the (predominantly white) Old Commonwealth countries. Two-thirds came from a wide range of countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Immigrants included many categories: highly-skilled personnel, low-skilled workers and asylum seekers.

## **II. Indian Migration to the UK**

Indian migration to Britain in the 1950s and early 1960s consisted predominantly of single men, who found accommodation together (often in village-based groups), and found work in manual occupations in manufacturing and the services. Most had no intention of settling permanently. However, following race riots in 1958, the British Government decided to restrict labour migration. Entry of workers from the New Commonwealth almost stopped, partly as a result of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, and partly as the result of the onset of economic stagnation in Britain. The 1962 Act severely limited the entry of workers, but permitted immigration of families of existing migrants, and had the unforeseen effect of turning temporary labour migration into permanent family settlement. Family reunion was in turn restricted by the 1971 Immigration Act. Then the 1981 Nationality Act removed British citizenship from the people of Commonwealth countries, so that future migrants from India were on the same footing as entrants from anywhere else in the world.

A further significant group arrived in the late 1960s: the so-called 'East African Asian'. These were descendants of Gujarati's and Punjabi's who had settled in the British colonies of Kenya, Tanganyika and Uganda in the 19th century, and who had taken on the role of a trading class. Many were forced out of East Africa (especially Uganda) by Africanisation policies. Britain (reluctantly) agreed to admit this group. Many of them had capital and good education credentials, and they prospered as business-people in Britain. By 2001 they and their descendants numbered nearly 200,000.

Ceri Peach points out (Peach, 2006) much of the South Asian population in Britain originated in just a few areas:

- The Mirpur District of Pakistan-administered-Kashmir and nearby Chhach area of Campbellpur district are thought to account for 80 per cent of the British Pakistani population.
- The Sylhet district accounts for over 80 per cent of the British Bangladeshi population.
- Jullundur District in Indian Punjab accounts for 80 per cent of British Sikhs.
- Gujarat State accounts for probably 70 per cent of Indian Hindus and a similar percentage of Indian Muslims.

Indian and other Commonwealth migration to Britain declined in the 1970s and 1980s, but by then the communities were well established in London, Birmingham and some of the industrial towns of Northern England. Indians tended to become concentrated in certain areas, partly due to chain migration, but also because of work opportunities and availability of cheap housing for purchase. In some cases, chain migration recreated homeland village affiliations in specific urban neighbourhoods, leading to segregation not only from the white population, but between specific Indian groups.

Some migration continued in this period: for instance Indian medical practitioners continued to make a considerable contribution to the National Health Service – as they do today. From the 1990s, increasing numbers of Indians came to Britain as part of the global trend to mobility of highly-skilled personnel. Student mobility also grew as a reflection of increasing prosperity in India, and the search for educational credentials from highly-regarded universities. Marriage migration has also continued, with ‘second generation’ and even ‘third generation’ descendants of Indian immigrants seeking their marriage partners in the home region.

**Table 1: Growth of the South Asian Population of Britain, 1951-2001**

| Year | Indian    | Pakistani | Bangladeshi | Total South Asian |
|------|-----------|-----------|-------------|-------------------|
| 1951 | 31,000    | 10,000    | 2000        | 43,000            |
| 1961 | 81,000    | 25,000    | 6000        | 112,000           |
| 1971 | 375,000   | 119,000   | 22,000      | 516,000           |
| 1981 | 676,000   | 296,000   | 65,000      | 1,037,000         |
| 1991 | 840,000   | 477,000   | 163,000     | 1,480,000         |
| 2001 | 1,000,000 | 747,000   | 280,000     | 2,027,000         |

Source: Peach, 2006, 134.

Note: These figures are based on national origins, and include children born to immigrants in Britain. Most South Asians in Britain are UK citizens.

### III. The Indian Population of Britain

British statistics are confusing: the UK uses three main categories for its population of immigrant origin. Indians figure importantly in all three:

- In 2005, there were 3 million foreign residents – that is persons of foreign nationality (5.2 percent of the total population). The main origins were Ireland (369,000), India

(190,000), Poland (110,000), USA (106,000), France (100 000), Germany (100,000), South Africa (100,000), Pakistan (95,000), Italy (88 000) and Portugal (88,000) (OECD, 2007).

- The foreign-born population (persons born abroad, who may have British or foreign nationality) in 2006 numbered 5.8 million (9.7 percent of total population), compared with 4.1 million in 1996. The main countries of origin were: India (570,000), Ireland (417,000), Pakistan (274,000), Germany (269,000), Poland (229,000), Bangladesh (221,000), South Africa (198,000), USA (169,000), Kenya (138,000) and Jamaica (135,000) (OECD, 2007).
- The term most frequently used in public debate is ethnic minority population (see Table-2). These are mostly British-born descendants of New Commonwealth immigrants who arrived from the 1950s to the 1970s. The 2001 Census recorded 4.6 million ethnic minority members (7.9 percent of total population). This classification is based on 'race', and does not include Irish (691 000 in 2001) or other white immigrant groups.

**Table 2: Population of the United Kingdom: by Ethnic Group, April 2001 Census**

|                                | Total population |           | Non-white population |
|--------------------------------|------------------|-----------|----------------------|
|                                | (Numbers)        | (Percent) | (Percent)            |
| White                          | 54,153,898       | 92.2      |                      |
| Mixed                          | 677,117          | 1.2       | 14.6                 |
| Indian                         | 1,053,411        | 1.8       | 22.7                 |
| Pakistani                      | 747,285          | 1.3       | 16.1                 |
| Bangladeshi                    | 283,063          | 0.5       | 6.1                  |
| Other Asian                    | 247,664          | 0.4       | 5.3                  |
| All Asian or Asian British     | 2,331,423        | 4.0       | 50.3                 |
| Black Caribbean                | 565,876          | 1.0       | 12.2                 |
| Black African                  | 485,277          | 0.8       | 10.5                 |
| Black Other                    | 97,585           | 0.2       | 2.1                  |
| All black or black British     | 1,148,738        | 2.0       | 24.8                 |
| Chinese                        | 247,403          | 0.4       | 5.3                  |
| Other ethnic groups            | 230,615          | 0.4       | 5.0                  |
| All minority ethnic population | 4,635,296        | 7.9       | 100.0                |
| All population                 | 58,789,194       | 100       |                      |

Source: ONS, 2004a.

The ethnic minority population lives mainly in England, where it made up 9 percent of the total population in 2001. They account for only 2 percent of the total population in Scotland and Wales, and less than 1 percent in Northern Ireland. They are concentrated in urban areas, especially London: 45 percent of ethnic minorities live in the capital, where they make up 29 percent of all residents. London fits the pattern of a dynamic, overcrowded, global city, with strong divisions based on class and race (ONS, 2004b).

Ceri Peach's analysis of the 2001 Census provides further information on the Indian-origin population. Indians display considerable religious diversity: 45 percent are recorded as Hindus, 29.1 percent as Sikh, 12.7 percent as Muslim, 4.9 percent as Christian, with small numbers of Buddhists, Jains and other religions or 'religion not stated'. Hindu mandirs, Sikh gurdwaras and Muslim mosques have become common throughout England. Indians have a very high level of home ownership, with 76 percent owning the houses they live in, compared with an average of 71 percent for the White British population, 66 percent for Pakistanis and only 37 percent for Bangladeshis. Indians also tend to own higher-quality detached or semi-detached houses, rather than terraced houses. Indians show very high rates of marriage within the ethnic group, with 93 percent of Indian-origin women marrying Indian-origin men. Moreover, over 90 percent of all marriages for Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were within their own religious group (Peach, 2006).

Educational and occupational indicators for the Indian-origin population reveal a fairly positive picture. In 1999, 66 percent of Indian girls achieved five or more General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) passes at grades A to C. This was better than white girls at 55 per cent. Indian boys did best among males at 54 per cent, compared with 45 percent for white boys. The results were worst for Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls (37 per cent), black boys (31 per cent), and Pakistani and Bangladeshi boys (22 per cent) (Office for National Statistics, 2002).

Data on unemployment rates reveals a similar hierarchy. In 2001 Bangladeshi women had the highest unemployment rate at 24 per cent—six times that of white women. Indian women had an unemployment rate of 7 per cent, while other ethnic groups ranged from 9 to 16 per cent. Bangladeshi men had a 20 percent unemployment rate, four times that of white men (5 per cent). Indian men had only slightly higher unemployment than white men—7 per cent. All other ethnic minority groups—both men and women—had unemployment rates two to three times higher than whites (Office for National Statistics, 2002).

The general picture was of a labour force stratified by ethnicity and gender and with a high degree of youth unemployment. Generally, people of Indian, Chinese, or Irish background tend to have employment situations as good as or sometimes better than the average for white British. By contrast, other groups are worse-off, with a descending hierarchy on most indicators of black African, black Caribbean, Pakistani, and—at the very bottom—Bangladeshis (Office for National Statistics, 2004). Gender distinctions vary: young women of black African and black Caribbean ethnicity seem to perform better in both education and employment than men of these groups, while the opposite appears to be the case for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. This can reflect a number of factors, including departure from the labour force due to lack of job opportunities. Cultural and religious factors cause women of some origins to have a lower propensity to work outside the home: Bangladeshi and Pakistani women have by far the lowest participation rates. Indian women tend to take up paid employment, although this applies more to Hindu, Sikh and Christian women than to Muslims.

## IV. Race Relations, Multiculturalism and National Identity

From the 1950s, conflicts between groups of the majority white population and immigrants started to take on political importance in Britain. In public discourse, such conflicts were largely blamed on racial and cultural differences, rather than on entrenched racism in the white population, or on situations of economic disadvantage or competition for jobs and social resources. The race relations approach, which emerged in the late 1960s and the 1970s, was based on a high level of state intervention through anti-discrimination legislation and policies, and micro-management of inter-group relations by social bureaucracies, police, and local authorities. Integration thus meant recognizing the existence of distinct groups, defined primarily on the basis of 'race'.

Schools played a major part in the integration policies of the 1960s and 1970s, with educationalists introducing the notion of 'multicultural education' as a way of developing mutual respect and self-esteem in multi-racial classrooms. Black activists dismissed the notion, arguing that the use of cultural labels implied that the problems lay in deficiencies among the minorities rather than in the racism of the white population. Instead, they called for 'anti-racist' education. However, the label stuck, and Britain came to be seen increasingly as a 'multicultural' society.

There was general agreement among leaders of the main political parties that integration and 'good race relations' in Britain were possible only on the basis of a restrictive immigration policy. Successful integration policies for those immigrants who had been admitted were thought to require exclusion of further entrants. Since 1965 a series of race relations acts have been passed, outlawing discrimination in public places, in employment, and in housing. These have been 'inextricably linked' (Solomos, 2003) with a series of increasingly restrictive immigration acts (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Immigration and Race Relations Legislation in the UK since 1962**

| Date | Legislation on Immigration              | Legislation on Race Relations  |
|------|---|--------------------------------|
| 1962 | Commonwealth Immigrants Act             |                                |
| 1965 |   | Race Relations Act             |
| 1966 |   | Local Government Act           |
| 1967 |   | Race Relations Act             |
| 1968 | Commonwealth Immigrants Act             | Race Relations Act             |
| 1969 | Immigration Appeals Act                 |                                |
| 1970 | Immigration Act                         |                                |
| 1971 | British Nationality Act                 |                                |
| 1972 | Immigration Act                         |                                |
| 1976 |   | Race Relations Act             |
| 1981 | British Nationality Act                 |                                |
| 1993 | Asylum and Immigration (Appeals) Act    |                                |
| 1996 | Asylum and Immigration Act              |                                |
| 1998 |   | Human Rights Act               |
| 1999 | Asylum and Immigration Act              |                                |
| 2000 |   | Race Relations (Amendment) Act |
| 2002 | Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act |                                |

Source: Solomos, 2003.

By the mid-1990s, Britain was widely seen as a multicultural society, in which distinct groups – defined by race, ethnicity, and religion – could live together peacefully and with reasonable levels of participation in social and political affairs. Race and multiculturalism remained controversial: conservatives lamented the loss of a supposed past homogeneity and harmony, while radicals argued that multiculturalism was often a device to avoid dealing with racism and inequality. But immigration had lost a good deal of its significance as a divisive political issue. This optimistic view is summed up in a speech by Lord Bhiku Parekh (a former Deputy Head of the official Commission for Racial Equality – CRE):

*Thanks to the efforts of ethnic minorities, anti-discrimination legislation and successive governments' policies designed to reduce ethnic minorities' economic, educational and other disadvantages, Britain is increasingly moving in the direction of becoming a relaxed and tolerant multi-ethnic and multicultural society (Parekh, 2000).*

Such perceptions changed in the early 21st century, as immigration, asylum, and 'social cohesion' once again become central political issues, as a result of the new waves of immigration mentioned above. The question was whether the model of state-regulated multiculturalism devised to deal with the older Commonwealth immigration would work effectively in the much more complicated emerging situation.

The racism, social exclusion, and hopelessness prevailing in many depressed areas were vividly demonstrated in the summer of 2001. The riots in de-industrialised northern towns with large minorities of Asian origin like Oldham, Bradford, Leeds, and Blackburn showed that social equality was still a distant dream for many members of ethnic minorities. These disturbances were also marked by the high-profile involvement of extreme-right groups like the British National Party, which gained surprising voter support in the June 2001 general election as a result.

The situation was exacerbated by the events of 11 September 2001 and the ensuing 'war on terrorism'. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq caused tensions, especially when it seemed that some young British Muslims of Asian immigrant background were being recruited as fighters. The London bombings of 7 July 2005 and subsequent attempted attacks led many people to question the loyalty of British Muslims. There is a public perception of rapid growth of Islam among the Asian and African minorities, while the media emphasise the role of fundamentalist mosques. In fact the 1.6 million Muslims in Britain only make up 2.7 percent of the population (ONS, 2003b), and only a very small proportion of these support radical religious ideas.

Today right-wing critics of multiculturalism argue that acceptance of cultural difference leads to separatism, and that there is a need to reassert 'core cultural values' and Britishness. This means insisting on the use of the English language and limiting the use of ethnic cultural and religious symbols in public. Left-wing critics argue that multiculturalism is doing little to achieve social and economic equality, and that integration into education and the labour markets is more important than acceptance of cultural difference.

'Social cohesion' has become the new keyword in debates on ethnicity and race. Although never clearly defined, social cohesion seems to imply replacing multiculturalism with an integration model designed to achieve both greater cultural homogeneity and socio-economic integration. The Home Office has introduced citizenship tests for immigrants, based on ideas of 'Britishness' and 'core values'. However critics point to the contrast between the formal

equality enjoyed by ethnic minorities, and their everyday experience of unemployment, inequality and social exclusion. The UK experience shows that citizenship is not necessarily a protection against social disadvantage and racism.

## V. Associations, Transnational Connections and Diasporas

Thomas Lacroix argues that the evolution of Indian associations in the UK can be divided into 'three ages':

1. The early organisations of the 1950s and 1960s provided self-help for single migrant workers. They were based on traditional ties of village organisation and religion.
2. During the 1960s-90s Indian associations grew in significance and became more diverse in their characteristics and functions. This was lined to family reunion, and the need for welfare and cultural associations. They were mainly religion-based, and emphasised educational tasks, cultural maintenance and the preservation of religious values and practices.
3. Since about 2000, second and third generation descendents of Indian immigrants have established new types of associations, transcending traditional boundaries of village and clan. Such associations are often the creation of highly-skilled and successful people, and also include newer professional migrants. They pursue developmental, religious and political goals, and use new modes of communication such as the Internet and mobile phones. They see themselves as diaspora members, concerned to develop their transnational identities, and to rediscover their homeland roots, while pursuing their careers in advanced economies. Return to India may well be a professional option for some members of these associations.

However, it is difficult to provide quantitative data on Indian associations in Britain. Many associations are informal in nature, and there is no obligation to register them with the authorities. Many associations do register on a voluntary basis, where this brings advantages. This registration takes several forms, including as a charity (to obtain tax-free status for donations); as a company limited by guarantee (to limit the liability of directors); or registration as a provident or friendly society (to facilitate the making of loans for housing or other purposes). Some associations register in two or three of these ways: e.g. Bardai Brahmin Samaj London is both a charity and a company limited by guarantee. Others – especially religious organisations – are not registered at all. For this reason, the numbers of Indian and other associations are unknown, and estimates of their numbers vary widely. There are certainly several thousand, although many are very small and localised.

A sizeable Indian civil society started to emerge in the 1960s, when religious, welfare and cultural organisations were set up by Indian settlers in Britain to meet the needs of a growing population. Religious and community self-help organisations still constitute the bulk of Indian associations. Welfare and educational organisations of various sorts (nurseries, week-end schools, sport clubs, elderly care etc.) form the second largest category. Welfare organisations aim to ease integration into the wider society and to preserve cultural cohesion. They therefore are at the boundary between the Indian community and British society. But they also stand between the religious and the political fields. Most welfare organisations have a marked political or religious leaning.

The International Migration Institute at Oxford University is currently carrying out research on Indian associations in three localities: the London Borough of Ealing, Slough (an industrial town in the South of England) and Birmingham. This paragraph includes some preliminary findings. Political organisations are relatively numerous due to the eventful history of the relationships between the diaspora and India (7 percent of the total in the three locations IMI is studying). These organisations can be divided into three categories: the oldest are the remnants of the independence movement (the Indian Overseas Congress, the Akali Dal); in the 1960s and 1970s, working class organisations such as the Indian Workers Association) emerged; the most recent organisations were created during the conflicts in the Punjab at the end of the 1980s (International Sikh Youth Federation, the Sikh Brotherhood). Party branches are a common form of migrant organisation. For example, the Indian Overseas Congress, the Indian Communist Party and the Akali in the 1980s, IOC and BJP nowadays are the main Indian parties with branches in Britain.

The entanglement between religious and political spheres is very strong. The Sikh movement illustrates this convergence. The Sikh autonomist movement has been active outside Punjab since the beginning of the 20th century. But it has always had a very limited audience. It is only after the 1984 events, when Indira Gandhi commanded the military forces to assault the Golden Temple in Amritsar (the most sacred shrine of the Sikh religion) that the ethno-national movement gained support amongst all strata of the community abroad. In addition to the traditional separatist parties, a wide range of organisations sprung up in the main countries of settlement. In the UK, the major organisations are the Council of Khalistan, the International Sikh Youth Organisation, Babbar Khalsa and Dal Khalsa. The movement led, in the space of a few years, to a complete reshaping of the Sikh associational field. The two major associations so far, the Indian Overseas Congress and the Indian Workers Association, were opposed to the separatist movement and rapidly lost their support within the community. In the 1990s, the politicisation of extremist religious movements in India has had important repercussion in the Diaspora. The Swaminarayan movement opened branches all over Britain and the BJP has an office in London. Several affairs in the USA and in Britain involving fake NGOs tapping the diaspora to provide funds to extremist groups also hint at the dynamism of such groups outside India.

Transnational connections between Indian organisations in Britain and other countries are very diverse. Cross-border organisations fall into three categories:

1. Community associations (religious and welfare local organisations), which are sometimes committed to a development project abroad. Example: the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewa Jatha of Birmingham, Namdhari Sangat Birmingham. They mostly work in partnership with other organisations (local NGOs, etc.) and do not maintain formal structures abroad.
2. Associations whose primary goal is to deliver services to the community but are affiliated to a transnational network (Example: the Indian Overseas Congress, the Arya Samaj London or the Bardai Brahmin Samaj)
3. Organisations set up to support activities abroad. They mostly are political (Sikh Human Rights Group) or development-oriented (Alternative India Development, International Network for the Development of India in Action). These organisations have branches, 'mother' or 'sister' organisations abroad.

The directions of the transnational connections vary themselves greatly. They can be trans-local, in particular in the case of small development projects, trans-state or even global. A specific characteristic of the Indian diaspora is that it maintain ties not only with the origin country, but also with people of Indian origin in the main receiving countries (USA, Canada, etc.) or even with former important host countries (in the case of development projects in Eastern Africa). The development projects supported in Kenya or Uganda by Indian organisations illustrate this characteristic.

## VI. Concluding Remarks

The presence of Indian diaspora in Britain has its root in the colonial relationship going back several centuries. The process of migration had been shaped by several immigration acts and nationality laws and legislations. The number of Indians in Britain however soared in post mid-20th century, that is, after India attained independence. The Indian migrants became one of the most important diaspora groups in Britain and also the largest minority group consisting of one million people. Indians in Britain are highly diverse in religion, culture and socio-economic position. Overall, their socio-economic position shows strong patterns of educational and economic success. At the same time, people of Indian origin practice a high level of cultural and religious maintenance, and display strong attachments to their ancestral homeland. Thus, paradoxically, Indians are both a well-integrated part of the British population and an important diaspora group, which remains involved in the economic, political and cultural affairs of India.

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