

Post-colonialism and migration: UK

A brief look at history

From Empire to Commonwealth

Between 1945 and 1965 most of the former colonies of the British Empire, which had a population of 500 million, became independent. In 1947, when the British left India, it was divided into a Hindu state (India) and a smaller Muslim state (Pakistan). Most of the former colonies remained in the Commonwealth.

After the Second World War

The largest number of immigrants to Britain after the Second World War were inhabitants of the British Empire and the Commonwealth. During the war they came from all over the world to serve in the armed forces or on merchant ships. When the war ended some remained in Britain.

Asylum seekers

Later groups of immigrants came from African countries, Sri Lanka, the Middle East and more recently former Yugoslavia and Rumania. They were asylum seekers, and people who were refugees from war or seeking employment in Britain to escape the poverty in their home countries. The influx of asylum seekers has continued up to today

Immigrants from the Commonwealth

At the end of the Second World War there was a labour shortage in Britain. Being inhabitants of the British Empire and later the Commonwealth, the first people who were free to settle in Britain were from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent. In 1948 the British Nationality Act gave all Commonwealth citizens the right to enter Britain, work and vote. Hospitals, transport and the postal services recruited immigrants to build up their labour force.

Immigration and growing racism in the 1960s

From the beginning of the 1960s onwards there was a massive rise in immigration. Political campaigns called for immigration control. Racism among the population grew. The National Front, a right-wing political party with extreme and reactionary views on immigration, was founded in 1967.

Immigration and growing racial tensions in the 1970s

In the 1970s racial tension and violence continued to grow in areas with a high concentration of people from ethnic minorities. 'Skinheads' attacked Pakistanis ('Paki-bashing'), and black youths clashed violently with the police. The Immigration Act of 1971 set out new rules restricting immigration. The 1976 Race Relations Act was implemented to enforce racial equality and make discrimination illegal.

Restrictions on immigration in the 1980s

In the 1980s immigration became further restricted. In 1986 visa controls were introduced for visitors from African countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Efforts of integration in the 1990s

In the 1990s efforts to integrate ethnic minorities were intensified. There were non-white Members of Parliament, and a first black trade union leader was elected. A 'Muslim Parliament' was opened in 1992. At the same time race-related riots kept flaring up in places with large ethnic communities. Access for asylum seekers was restricted more and more.

The present situation

Ethnic minorities in Britain

According to the 2001 census, the largest ethnic minority in Britain are people of Indian descent. The second-largest ethnic minority are people of Pakistani descent, followed by people of mixed ethnic descent, Black Caribbean, Black African and Bangladeshi descents. Together these groups make up 7.9 per cent of the UK population. About half of the members of these ethnic minorities were born in Britain. Most of them live in England, and about 45 per cent of the total population of ethnic minorities live in the London area.

Attitudes toward immigration

Most British citizens welcome or at least accept immigrants. As in some other European countries, Britain needs immigrants. Without them the workforce could diminish in a population in which the percentage of pensioners is increasing. For this reason a carefully managed migration policy is believed to hold economic advantages.

Citizenship and language

The government wants newly arrived immigrants seeking British citizenship to integrate and become active members of the society. Therefore it promotes the learning of language skills and practical knowledge about the United Kingdom and the British way of life.

Integration, not assimilation

The government aims at improving the immigrants' employment prospects and skills. The idea is that integration is important but does not mean complete assimilation (the "melting pot"). Immigrants are not expected to lose their national characteristics but to have shared identities. Their strongly held ethnic and religious identities can exist alongside their British identity. In a multicultural society cultural diversity thrives in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance.

Tolerance and the multicultural society

Taking into account particular religious and ethnic habits, attitudes, behaviour and traditions is, without a doubt, a question of tolerance. However, this tolerance is limited by the basic laws and moral principles that govern the nation. In the western world *sharia* law, which gives women a permanent status of inferiority and men overwhelming power, is usually thought to be unacceptable or even offensive.

Muslims in Britain

In the light of conflicts in the Middle East, Kashmir and Afghanistan, British Muslims may feel a strong sense of solidarity with Muslims around the world. Especially since the events of September 11, 2001, a more critical spotlight has been turned on British Muslims. A growing number of Britons believe that the British Muslim community needs to do more to integrate itself into mainstream culture. Many Muslims, on the other hand, believe that the general public sees Muslims as separate and different from the rest of the population and even complain about a high level of Islamophobia.

Integration and the younger generation of Muslims

A majority of moderate Muslims think of themselves first and foremost as British Muslims, rather than only as Muslims. This reflects the immigrant experience of the older generation for whom becoming British citizens was a major milestone in their lives. But there is some evidence that the younger generation of British Muslims, most of whom were born in Britain, are less willing to integrate or may reject the idea of integration altogether. A minority of them are even likely to say that their community is too integrated. These young radicals rebel not only against British society, but also against their own community and its more moderate leaders. For them Islam has a strong appeal. Instead of following their parents' path of job, integration and material prosperity, they turn to religion to give their life meaning. They feel as alienated from their parents' culture as they do from secular British mainstream culture. They lead "parallel lives" in a separate community. Radicalised by fundamentalist *imams*, they reject Western culture and values as inferior and idealise Islamic culture, *sharia* law and *jihad*.