

From “Different Moons’ booklet, produced to accompany the ‘Different Moons’ project by the Horse and Bamboo puppet company exploring the stories of the first generation of people to come to Rossendale from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

Written by Bob Frith, @Horse+Bamboo 2014, used with permission.

POST WAR BRITAIN

During the immediate post-war period migrations began as a result of a combination of economic and political developments. After the end of the war in 1945, Britain faced huge challenges. The economy had to be rebuilt and it was a time of great social change. The NHS was established, slums were cleared and industries began to expand. Servicemen and women returned from the war expecting better conditions at the workplace and were no longer prepared to accept pre-war standards.

It was also recognised by the UK government that there was a shortage of labour, so Britain looked for workers from Europe and the countries of the Commonwealth, particularly the West Indies, India and Pakistan. The Royal Commission on Population reported in 1949 that immigrants of ‘good stock’ would be welcomed ‘without reserve’.

THE NEW WORKFORCE

The textile industry, on which Lancashire’s prosperity had depended, had been in decline before the war but in 1945 there was optimism that it could revive if it was able to reduce its costs. As a result, the industry enthusiastically grasped the opportunity offered by men emigrating from overseas to work in the cotton mills. The majority of these jobs were low paid and in the least popular shifts ,such as night work.

Most of this new workforce were from Pakistan. Pakistan had initially been divided into West and East Pakistan after Partition from India in 1947, but in 1971 East Pakistan seceded, to become the independent country of Bangladesh. The majority of the men who came to work in Lancashire fully expected to return to their homes in Pakistan or Bangladesh after a period of working here, during which time they would save sufficient money for their families.

From Pakistan the main areas of migration were from the villages around the town of Attock in the north-west; many people in Haslingden come from there and from Mirpur, close to the border with Kuwait (sic). In Bangladesh the main centre of emigration was Sylhet, then a poor region in the east of the country. Many people from Mirpur region and Sylhet settled in Rawtenstall.

LANGUAGES

Each of the regions of these countries speak different languages – Urdu is the official language of Pakistan, although Punjabi is also spoken along with dialects such as Hindku. Many of the immigrants from the north and west of the country

were Pashtuns, speaking Pashto, while Bengali (or Bangla) is the language of most Bangladeshis, though many who came to Rossendale speak a Sylheti dialect.

THE NEW COUNTRY

Workers usually made their way to Rossendale after arriving in Liverpool, Hull or one of the other ports, or on a flight to London from Karachi. Many would then use the informal network of contacts within the South Asian community to discover where work might be available.. After settling into a job, it would not be unusual to be encouraged by the mill owners to ask their brothers, uncles, cousins – other male family members – to join the workforce. In this way several male members of an extended family would often gather to work and live close by one another.

Communications between Lancashire and home at that time were difficult. There were very few telephones, both in the UK and in the villages in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Telephone lines were notoriously unreliable. As a result the new arrivals found it very difficult to keep in touch with families and friends back home, so postal and telegram services provided the main means of contact. Feelings of loneliness and isolation were very common and hard to bear.

For most of the men, when they first arrived, living conditions in Rossendale were fairly primitive. Few of the houses they rented would have had baths; toilets were usually not connected to the sewers. In the 1960s this was not uncommon; many people in Rossendale lived in similar conditions. Initially, it also wasn't unusual for 10 or more of the immigrant workmen to rent a house together, sharing a limited number of basic dormitory-type beds to cover different shifts at the mill.

GAINING CONTROL

Few of the men spoke English particularly well and as a result were unable to understand what services were available to them. As a result the refuse collection, council wash facilities (such as slipper baths, available at the municipal pools), medical and housing services, were all difficult to access.

Slowly things began to change. A few of the men got together to set-up informal support groups and organise themselves. Many of the testimonies from people interviewed for the Different Moons project dwell on this period. The struggle to improve their living conditions and life-style and the slow process of saving in order to send money home, purchase houses and gain control of their own living requirements, dominated much of their limited spare time.

Many friendships were made with the host community and there are frequent stories of support and help that the immigrants experienced. Equally there were the challenges of racism and intolerance to be confronted.

CHANGES IN POLICY

For both the immigrant and host communities things changed substantially during the first 25 years following the arrival of the first South Asians to Rossendale. From the 1970s onwards there had been much debate about UK immigration policy and successive governments began programmes of legislation to restrict the rules governing the right to immigration. This contributed to, and concided with, the recognition among many South Asian workers that their move to Lancashire was likely to be for months or years and for many would be permanent.

From around 1970, women and sometimes children and parents, began to move from Pakistan or Bangladesh to be with their menfolk. Families settled in Rossendale together and inevitably this meant that the nature of the local South Asian communities changed.

CHANGES AS WORK

At work, in housing and education, South Asians often faced the challenges of misunderstandings and discrimination. To overcome these problems and to improve their standard of living and escape factory work, many became self employed. As the textile industry continued its decline, Asian-owned businesses created their own jobs, while others worked to increase awareness and change practice within institutions. As this happened they began to contribute more and more to the local economy and community.

LINKS

In the sixty years sinice the first South Asian immigrants arrived in Rossendale things have changed beyond recognition. Families originally from Attock or Sylhet now have three generations settled and at home in Rossendale. Despite this, strong links with the mother countries have been retained and many individuals and families return regularly to the villages in Pakistan or Bangladesh that their grandparents left 50 or more years ago.

TODAY

A settled community of South Asian families has developed in Rossendale. It has opened mosques for worship and shops and businesses to cater for food and other necessities. New generations of young people from Asian families have taken the opportunity to study in college and universities. Many of these families have achieved a prosperity that the first generation of immigrants would have been astonished to witness, even when it may have been their own aspiration and dream.

However, as a result of rapidly changing economic circumstances and overseas policies there is evidence of a recent growth of Islamophobia within the UK. No doubt the whole community will continue to rise to these complex challenges to

create an ever more intricate social tapestry. The local South Asian heritage community is vibrant and visible and here to stay, very much part of Rossendale in the twenty-first century.