

| |
|--|
| Institution: University of Oxford |
| Unit of Assessment: 029 English Language and Literature |
| Title of case study: Informing Public Discourse about pre-War Indian Migration to Britain |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Elleke Boehmer's archival research into early Indian migration (1870-1950) has enhanced public understanding of the cultural impact of migration, challenging common assumptions of its historical impact in Britain and assisting better-informed public discourse. Her work demonstrates that the effects of one of the major immigration flows to Britain were on balance more constructive than threatening, increasing and improving cultural interaction rather than reinforcing or exacerbating colonial divides. Disseminated through a Government Forum, travelling exhibitions, film and installation, radio broadcasts, and public lectures, her research has improved the evidence base for civil servants, policy makers and cultural commentators interested in the impact of immigration on identity formation.</p> |
| <p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Elleke Boehmer is an internationally recognized scholar of colonial history and postcolonial literature, her work in recent years focussing in particular on literary perceptions of the cross-border movement of peoples and on how lives in transit are expressed in writing of encounter and migration, including poetry. Her recent project (since 2010) <i>India Arrived: Seeing and Being in Britain, 1870-1914</i> expands knowledge of and insight into South Asian diasporic history in Britain by extending the narrative of migration back in time, eight decades before the relatively well-known post-1950 period. The study is distinguished for its unprecedentedly detailed and far-reaching exploration of the India-Britain relationship from the perspective of Indian writers, intellectuals, maharajahs, politicians and gurus in Britain, rather than the more conventional metropolitan angle, and its consideration of how modern urban Britain was viewed by these self-conscious citizens of empire. By focusing on Indian perspectives and inputs to cross-cultural interaction in the period, the research explores in depth the contribution that these Indian writers and intellectuals on British soil made to some of the leading literary-cultural movements and cosmopolitan identities of the day (the metropolitan travelogue, orientalist writing, decadence, detective fiction, Georgian poetry, early geometric modernism), none of which was until very recently seen as moulded by Indian hands.</p> <p>In its mapping of a far more extensive network of cross-cultural Indian-British involvement through migration than was previously available, the <i>India Arrived</i> research and its outputs influentially propose that early South Asian migration was not merely anticipatory or paradigmatic of later Indian-British inter-relationships, but aspirational and form-giving in the emphasis that it placed on collaborative closeness and mutual exchange of cultural influences. The research provides insight into the deep history of Britain's diasporas on British soil – indeed of these diasporas as fundamental to the ongoing making of British identity, part of an unfolding story of layering and mixing which has defined lives and selves on these islands from the time that 'Britain began' (Cunliffe). It presents portraits of culturally translated individuals, unlikely friendships, and encounters between strangers melting rapidly into familiarity (including Gandhi, Naidu, Binyon, Rothenstein, Tagore). It also reconfigures external, outside-in views of migrants to show them embedded in what are often thought of as quintessentially British environments, as in the discovery that Indian travellers 'read' metropolitan London through an urban visual vocabulary drawn from Bombay or Calcutta, or that Oriental undertones of 19th-century decadence were supplied by Anglicized poets such as Sarojini Naidu or Manmohan Ghose in their attempts to 'easternize' their work (viz. the Bodleian exhibition 'Indian Traces in Oxford'). The research articles have offered new insights into how Britain has been a home to sub-continental migrants for well over a century.</p> |
| <p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elleke Boehmer and Sumita Mukherjee. 'Re-making Britishness: Indians at Oxford at the Turn of the Century'. Eds. Catherine McGlynn and Andrew Mycock. <i>Britishness, Identity and Citizenship: The View From Abroad</i>. London. Peter Lang. 2011. pp. 95-112. • Elleke Boehmer. 'The zigzag lines of tentative connection: Indian-British contacts in the late nineteenth century'. <i>Only Connect: India in Britain 1870-1950</i>. Ed. Susheila Nasta. Palgrave Macmillan. 2013. pp. 12-27. • Elleke Boehmer and Susheila Nasta. 'Shaping Britain: Preface.' <i>South Asians and the shaping of Britain, 1870-1950</i>. Eds. Ruvani Ranasinha et al. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2013. <p>All available on request.</p> |

Evidence of the quality of the research:

- AHRC Fellowships Scheme award AH/I001123/1 'India Arrived: Seeing and Being in Britain 1870-1914 – an examination of the definitive phases and key moments of early Indian migration to Britain'. January-April 2011. £35,583. Rated: Outstanding.
- This was a follow-up award to: AHRC Major Research Award AH/E009859/1 'South Asians Making Britain, 1870-1950', on which Boehmer was first Co-I, with PI Prof. S. Nasta (OU). The project investigated migrant South Asian contributions to British culture and society. Boehmer was lead investigator of the 1870-1920 strand of the project, together with RF Dr S Mukherjee, and during this period began the research consolidated in 'India Arrived' above. Oct. 07-Sept. 2010. £531,778. Rated: Outstanding.
- ITN-Marie Curie (EU) funding to support one Postdoctoral Fellow in English, in Narratives on Identity and Diaspora, Oct 2012-Oct 2013 £95,000 (Dr Lynda Ng).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impact of Boehmer's work has taken two main forms: impact on the framing of recent public policy discussions about immigration, through her contributions to a government forum; and impact on the work of museums and other institutions curating and mediating British history, through assisting better interpretation of collections relating to the history of immigration in this country, and enabling better public understanding of on-going contributions to the culture and identity formation.

Impact on the framing of government policy debates. On 24 January 2012 Boehmer was an invited participant in a Scoping Workshop under the auspices of the UK Government Office for Science, aimed at framing initial terms for a fuller 'Foresight' report on 'Future Identities'. Both the workshop and the project itself were arranged by Sir John Beddington (Chief Scientific Advisor). The workshop was a civil service day forum on the social, political, cultural and environmental impacts of migration on British society now and into the future. Boehmer reported on migration as a public good, drawing on material from her essay subsequently published in Only Connect to demonstrate that the UK has been a society of migrants for a long time (at least from the mid-19th C) and has been generally more receptive than not: in short, migration is nothing new, and represents no cause for a moral panic in the present day. Indeed, Britain has largely benefitted from migration (it's impossible to think of this society as a purely native-born society). Her emphasis is discernible in the final Scoping Workshop report, especially it's underscoring of the complexity of identity, the importance of histories of migration and of integration into Britain for migrants (pp. 2, 9, 20, 45-50, 53) (Ref. i). Boehmer attended the follow on meeting of the Foresight (government) forum, and launch for the report. Eleri Jones, project leader, confirms that the report (published in 2013) 'took a broad view of the current evidence for the drivers of change affecting identity in the UK over the next decade, bringing together for the first time current evidence and pointing out some of the main implications for policy makers. The report has proved useful for a range of Government Departments and there has been interest from, for example, parts of the Cabinet Office.' (Ref. 1)

Impact on interpretation of the cultural impact of past immigration

Much of the dissemination work undertaken by Boehmer has directly impacted on the way in which various cultural groups are interpreting the history of immigration in Britain to and with the wider public. Boehmer contributed a filmed interview about India's first woman lawyer, Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954) to 'OxAsians' – a Heritage Lottery funded multimedia Installation employing film interviews with historians, biographers, and in some cases subjects. OxAsians focused on famous Asian subjects who were students at Oxford after 1880 in order to show that there was a significant Indian presence among the student and the teaching bodies at Oxford (as at other British universities) from the time that religious restrictions on entry were lifted. The installation launched in April 2010 at the Pitt Rivers Museum, where it worked creatively with the architecture of the building to evoke the sense of an alternative history speaking in, and from, its spaces: it produced a 3D reproduction of Oxford's college walls, complete with Gothic arches, each arched area working as a mini film screen. Actors spoke the words of the subjects, and talking heads (Boehmer among them) added historical context and interpretation. The films brought to life the experiences of Benazir Butto, Indira Ghandi, Ifkatiir Ali Kahn Pataudi, and others, reflecting also on how much has changed over time, most obviously with respect to racism. The Pitt Rivers Museum saw a significant expansion of its audience, the installation organizer working with community and arts groups from around the Oxford area to draw in many Asian-British viewers who had never entered

the museum before. Comments in the visitors' book included (from a member of the South Asian community) 'inspirational ... fills me with pride'; and (from one of the actresses) 'knowing so much more about our heritage and history [has been] an inspirational journey' (Ref. ii). OxAsians subsequently visited the Oxford Records Office (Ref. iii), and Langley Academy in Slough (where it assisted GCSE history syllabus delivery in Museums Week – over 600 children seeing the exhibition in the foyer, and taking part in activities). Teachers and students commented that prior to seeing the exhibition they had 'absolutely no idea' that the Indian historical figures featured had any involvement with Britain, having thought of them as 'over there'; the exhibition 'filled big gaps'. Further exhibition venues included Slough Museum, Reading Museum, the Paul Robeson Theatre, Hounslow, and a careers fair encouraging students to consider career possibilities in the museums and arts sector. An estimated total of 6000 people saw the installation.

OxAsians coincided with a one-month exhibition, 'Indian Traces at Oxford', curated and organised by Boehmer and post-doctoral fellow S Mukherjee and hosted by the Bodleian Library through March 2010; also with a session on 'The New Asian Novel' at the Oxford Literary Festival. The exhibition gathered significant items from the Bodleian's own Indian holdings, including Sanskrit documents, Amitav Ghosh's DPhil thesis, a piece of a Cornelia Sorabji sari, and a poetry collection by Laurence Binyon and Manmohan Ghose. For the Oxford Literary Festival session, Boehmer was joined in conversation with prominent Indian and Pakistani novelists. The audience of 25-30 festival goers entered into spirited debate about whether or not literature can deal adequately with 'colonial guilt'. A one-day symposium on 1 March, open to the general public, discussed cultural experiences of early Indian students in Oxford and the impact of Indian studies on the university and city in the C19. Ghosh gave a presentation recounting his time as a student in Oxford, followed by a reading from his fiction the next day. The symposium (c. 60 attendees) included a public tour of 'Indian Oxford' which attracted 25 participants (numbers had to be limited; it was later repeated in an ad hoc way several times). 7 'Bodcasts' of the symposium were recorded as part of the Oxford Spires podcasting project (one by Boehmer; others by A Ghosh, H Ansari, R Arrowsmith, R Sorabji, A. Mondal, S. Mukherjee). To date, they have attracted 2312 downloads. (Ref. iv).

A further exhibition entitled 'South Asians Making Britain', organised by the Open University in collaboration with the British Library, was co-curated by Boehmer and five others, led by Florian Stadler from the OU. The Oxford English Faculty contributed £4000 of funding assistance. This travelling exhibition, widely advertised in local newspapers and relevant venues (e.g. Woking mosque), provided a more mobile vehicle for informing public understanding of British immigration in and beyond the UK. It traced through photographs and text the impact of early Indian migration to Britain, 1870-1950, including South Asian contributions to sport, the arts, domestic, cultural and intellectual life, resistance and activism, as well as national and global politics – interpreting a wealth of new material from archives in India, Sri Lanka, the United States and Britain. Boehmer helped to select the images and authored three of the 12 panel texts, looking at Literature and Arts, Intellectual Life, and World War I. In July 2010 four preview panels featured as the backdrop to an introductory reception in New Delhi for the British coalition government's trade mission to India, where they provided background for the Prime Minister's meeting with leaders of the arts and culture sector at the British Council. The panels (made available in response to a special request from the then head of BBC India) made the visual point that Britain recognises the positive cultural contribution of Indian migration over the past century and a half and is seeking to build on the resulting close connections between the two countries in its current and future trading arrangements. They also demonstrated a long history of close cultural and economic involvement between the two countries, so that consolidating trade relations today can be seen to embed an already existing relationship. Between September 2010 and July 2011 the full 12 panels began a touring exhibition, funded jointly by British Library Regional Programmes and Open University Strategic Funding. They were displayed initially at the British Library, 13-14 Sept. 2010, then for periods of 3-6 weeks at: Bradford Central Library; Manningham Library, Shipley; St. Barnabas Library, Leicester; Birmingham Central Library; Jubilee Library, Brighton; Surrey History Centre, Woking (football 1,727); Croydon Central Library; Barking Library; Swiss Cottage Library; Middlesbrough Library; and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. With the aid of funding from the British Council in Berlin, an expanded version of the exhibition moved in early 2012 to the Centre for British Studies, Alexander von Humboldt University, Berlin, 31 Jan.–16 March; returning

to the UK for final showings at Asia House and Southall Library. In Berlin the exhibition's work in informing and changing preconceptions about the cultural impact of immigration contributed directly to the delivery of school curricula. Feedback from the many visitors who commented appreciatively includes (from a teacher) 'Thank you very much for a very interesting exhibition on our 2nd semester's topic – "Cultural Identity/Migration". The students learned a lot.' The Administrator at the Humboldt Centre, confirms that 'schools and the general public ... turned up in big numbers, made themselves comfortable, asked questions and scribbled notes down. ... [T]his topic is currently top of the agenda at many schools' (Ref. v).

The interpretative work of all the above exhibitions, and the reach of their impact, were assisted by interviews and lectures given by Boehmer over the same period:

- for radio, an interview with the poet Daljit Nagra as part of his BBC Radio 4 programme 'The Poet's Indian, the Words Are English', focusing on 19th c Indian poets in English, including Indian migrant poets to Britain (aired 7 Nov. 2010, and again on 13 Nov.) (Ref. vi).
- a guest lecture on 'Indian-British Contacts in the Late Nineteenth Century: India Arrived' at the Centre for British Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin, 29 Oct. 2012. This was a follow-up lecture to the visit of 'South Asians Making Britain' travelling exhibition to the Centre for British Studies in Summer 2011; c. 200 attended. Gesa Stedman, Professor at the Centre, confirms that '[t]he lecture and the exhibition were very well received and we were able to draw on both during the courses we taught throughout the next academic year' (Ref. 2).
- for the London Literature Festival, a panel presentation on 'Asian Bloomsbury' by Boehmer, Romesh Gunasekera, Susheila Nasta, Sukhdev Sandhu, at the Royal Festival Hall, 8 July 2012, exploring how this site of early modernism was 'imbued at its heart' by India. The panel session was preceded by a tour of Asian Bloomsbury. 20 people participated (numbers had to be limited); approximately 65 attended the panel exhibition (Ref. 3).
- an interview with Amitav Ghosh (in conversation with Boehmer and Anshuman Mondal), published in the leading literary magazine for international writing, with coverage significantly beyond the academy, *Wasafiri*; and a short creative non-fiction piece, 'East to West', in the voice of an Indian traveller to England via Suez c 1880, amalgamating actual commentaries and diaries of Indian travellers to render a subjective experience of immigration. Financial support of £900 for Ghosh's visit was provided by OUP-John Fell Funding. The interview provided a long retrospective vista to the exhibition, back to the 14C. In response to Boehmer's questions, Ghosh spoke vividly about the more numinous aspects of the underpinning research – thumbprints on documents, oral histories – his reading of these traces probing the exhibition's readings. 'East to West'. (Ref. vii).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)#

Testimony

- (1) Email from project leader, Dept of Business, Innovation and Skills, 7.10.13
- (2) Email from Professor, Centre for British Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin, 9.10.13
- (3) Corroborating email from Paul Watson, Royal Festival Hall, 17.10.13

Other evidence sources

- (i) *Foresight Future Identities*, Final Project Report (London: Government Office for Science, 2013). <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/foresight/docs/identity/13-523-future-identities-changing-identities-report.pdf> and hard copy.
- (ii) OxAsians exhibition visitors' book and statement from Neena Sohal, installation organiser.
- (iii) Sample media publicity for OxAsians: http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/oxford/hi/people_and_places/arts_and_culture/newsid_8661000/8661776.stm
- (iv) Bodcast download figures courtesy of IT-services, Oxford.
- (v) 'Making Britain' impact: corroborating email from Florian Stadler to Boehmer, 10 May 2013, providing details of the attendance and feedback on the 'Making Britain' exhibitions; includes statements from Sue Caton and Catherine Smith.
- (vi) 'The Poet's Indian, the Words Are English', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00vrbs1>
- (vii) *Wasafiri*: 'Networks and Traces', 27.2 (2012), 30-35; 'East to West', 27.2 (2012), 28-9.