

# The Dialectic of Here and There: Anthropology ‘at Home’ and British Asian Communism<sup>1</sup>

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*Ethnographers in Britain seem to have by and large ignored left wing political activity among South Asian settlers on these islands. The lustrous career of South Asian communists active in the UK is however not to be romanticized and of course there were many more people not involved in class politics than can be registered in the annals of communist champions. But it is clear that the groundwork for many of the kinds of political positions taken for granted today were forged in adversity and struggle under scarlet flags. That this again means that not everyone is involved in left wing groups and causes today goes without saying, and again it should not need to be pointed out that an overly rosy view of the inheritance of South Asian politicals would be inappropriate and misguided (but all those slightly strange left wing uncles and aunties do have an influence). The point is that given the really existing conditions into which most South Asian youth are born in multi-racist Britain, and given the heritage to which they can, if they wish, lay claim, it should be no surprise that comprehension of the struggle is ‘imbibed as if with mothers milk’, as one informant described it to me. Why has scholarship singularly failed to register this?*

## Anthropology ‘at Home’

labour in the white skin cannot be free if in the black it is branded. (Marx, 1867, p. 301)

In a short story collected in *Where the Dance Is*, Ambalavaner Sivanandan tells the tale of a meeting of a Marxist study group in a pub in Hampstead, probably sometime in the 1970s. In this engaging (semi-autobiographical?) story, a Sri Lankan

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Ph.D. student at the London School of Economics, going by the name of Bala, is invited to a meeting by Clarence, an acquaintance from home, now resident in the 'mother country'. Bala is uncertain as to just what is required of him:

I was not sure how to play my role: as a red insurrectionary or as black militant.  
(Sivanandan, 2000, p. 48)

The four white comrades bought him drinks for both affectations, but when the discussion turned to the issue of immigration into Britain it was Clarence, the 'senior immigrant', who won the most approval, and a kiss from one of the women, for a position that should readily be recognized even amidst the smoke and fug of the mid-afternoon local boozier. As the story tells it, Clarence

mumbled and spluttered incoherently about the responsibility of the mother country to its children and ended up declaring, 'we are here because you were there',

something Bala had heard before. The meeting broke up, with the next Saturday scheduled as a discussion of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*.

The story goes on with various intricacies, the woman who kisses Clarence cooks a curry for Bala, Bala gets to know something of Clarence's life in Britain, but the main point in my retelling this scene is neither appreciation of Sivanandan's accomplished literary talents, nor to rehash some scenario in mockery of the curry-cooking patronising white left woman Tessa, but to register the movement that Sivanandan always tries to effect: the complication and extension of thought beyond platitudes and slogans, achieved always also from an activist's perspective. The formula 'we are here because you were there' may in fact have the ring of truth, and it makes an excellent chant, and needs must be said. But saying it for approval, saying it into the ether, saying it without consequence, also deserves critical attention. Sivanandan questions the motives and context of sloganeering even in the very heart of a Marxist cell meeting discussion of immigration in the days when Compendium bookshop was still a fixture and visits to Cuba were the norm. Sivanandan shows us exactly where romantic attachments and the deceits of too-easy acceptance only allow platitudes when more is required. As to what happens at the end of the tale, without giving the story away—its called 'The man who loved the dialectic'—a nuanced Marxism makes more sense of the predicament of contemporary life than that afforded in any other conception.

What then for writing about South Asians in Britain that would do more than rehearse either the trite axioms of identity politics or the romantic attachments of essentialist stereotype? On two sides there is a seductive danger and all too easy exoticist trap—playing the ethnic card and falling for ethnicist stereotypes have been the preserve of many who would write, with good intentions, the history of South Asians in Britain. On the one hand those who have appropriated the role of documenting Asian identities in the metropole, on the other metropolitan identities

playing up to expectations. For the sake of convenience, this essay identifies this double trap in the congealed positions of anthropologists writing on South Asians in Britain, and in their identitarian informants—and it uses the critical position of a British-South Asian communist history (the subject matter that stems from Sivanandan's fictional study group) as the counterfoil that disrupts this duality.

The procedure of taking category and classification in advance of observation and discussion has reified and fixed a conservative set of stereotypes. To assume that caste, kinship, arranged marriages and religious tradition are the main keys to comprehension of the social and political experience of South Asians in Britain is a common delusion. A delusion born from the work of anthropologists bent on finding rural and village subjects conveniently replicated in metropolitan settings. This is a conservative anthropology in the extreme, owing more to allegiance to old categories found 'over there' than politics and experience of people with agency 'over here'. Not to say, of course, that caste, kin and religion are or were unimportant, but, as we will see, equally worthy of attention could be workplace and neighbourhood organizations, trade unionism, political activism, socialist and communist party affiliation, rallies and other such associations. It can be argued that the organizational history of South Asians in Britain has been particularly obscured by a blinding culturalism attuned only to the exotic. The worst consequence of this exoticism is to reduce the 'migrant' worker to a timeless and rural pre-political unconsciousness—an imperialist oversight that replicates ethnicist fantasy and depoliticises by means of reified culture.

Ethnographic approaches to South Asians in Britain have been culturalist and conservative in exactly this way (as we will see, Werbner, 1990; Gillespie, 1995; Hall, K., 2002). In the postcolonial framework, we should agree at the beginning that is important to avoid the stupid generalisations of voyeuristic social science. To extrapolate from one or two cases of some behaviour or other to then ascribe that behaviour to a cultural, national or ethnic group as a whole would be an error. The imaginary god-like observations that declare that 'Muslims are X' or 'Sikhs do Y' is as unacceptable as the old anthropological attributionism of 'Nuer think . . .' 'Nuer say . ..'. Certainly there can be no final assertion that South Asians in Britain are or are not more or less politically engaged than anyone else—though like everyone else, some South Asians are and some are not . . . these arabesques are farcical. In discussion of diasporic Asian presence in Britain the designation must be 'not postcolonial, not not postcolonial'. (Similarly, the critical position in this paper might be 'not communist, not not communist'.)

This is not just a methodological concern of relevance to anthropological categories; it has current political purchase. In the discussion, for example, of participation by Muslim groups in the anti-war coalition, or as 'targets of security forces' at home, in the context of the 'War on Terror', a host of cascading racist substitutions appear, sliding rapidly from the shock image of fundamentalist suicide bombers to a spurious link with asylum seekers, generalised to all Muslims, then further extended to Asians and to non-white people in general. This often

unexamined cascade inevitably draws sustenance from the general, more influential and wider social and culturalist limits of understanding of Asians, Islam, Hinduism and politics as disseminated in Britain through the artefacts of white academia. Monographs of Asian experience in Britain are few, but telling. In numerous university course offerings, as well as in the popular media, all South Asians are characterised in a double strategy, either as demons or as exotica, and neither stereotype comes close to an appreciation of the diversity of those under anthropological examination. The double strategy makes Asians either, and both, a people of curious culture—bhangra, spicy food, Bollywood—and a people of fanaticism—Islam, Hindutva, religious extremism. Sometimes both at the same time—militant spiritualism, spicy sweetmeats—the pathologies of categorization reveal more of the West than is seen in other domains. This ‘exotica-fanatica’ two step is found in academic texts explicitly to the exclusion of large sections of the history, and present, of South Asians in Britain. The culturalist discourse actively ignores organized political activity, at best offering asides to collaborationist or merely community-level action. This is true of the historical period of the anti-colonial movement, the Mahatma, just as much as it is true of the present, where the local Asian Labour Party glamour candidate might be foregrounded. There is no discussion of, for example, the leading contribution to the Communist Party of Great Britain of the likes of Saklatvala, Palme Dutt, or Krishna Menon, and it is very rare to see mention of similarly motivated activists in any of the major anthropological studies of South Asians in Britain today. In part the effort of this essay is to suggest a means to reconstruct this absent history by way of the field of biography (Callaghan, 1993; Wadsworth, 1998), the historical survey work of Visram (2002) and the living memory of so many Uncles, Aunties and the others involved in organizations like the Indian Workers Association, the Pakistani Workers Association, the journal *Lalkar*, and so forth (see Sharma *et al.*, 1996 for a beginning attempt to acknowledge the recent history of the IWA; Brah, 1998 for a collection of more contemporary documents).

It is worth remembering from the start, in these days of ahistorical and culturalist appreciation of South Asian ethnicity in Britain, that there could be no ethnic trip, for academics or for cultural entrepreneurs alike, without the initial project of colonialism and its co-constituent consequence of labour exploitation. The British Raj and its global extractive orientation over several hundred years, and the brute fact that consequent migration into Britain from the colonies was not philanthropy, cannot be underestimated. Conventionally, ritual mention of imperial history is made in most scholarly studies—if not quite chanting ‘we are here because you were there’—but the drawing of inferences and implications does not necessarily inform general understandings in a political way. More often than not a political context is registered then diplomatically relegated, as culturalist commentary seeks out more flamboyant and exuberant themes than one which notes how so-called ethnic peoples were brought to Britain with one purpose in mind—white industry wanted to work them hard (in a way that war-weary organized white workers would not accept).

Immigration shaped by imperialism and the exploitative requirements of manufacturing is the inescapable condition that frames British Asian settlement.

Of course it should not be thought that South Asian ‘migrant’ labourers had no agency in migration, or that the pull factor of labour shortage on the part of British industry was not complicated by diverse negotiations and structuring factors such as those called ‘chain migration’ and biraderi processes—as indeed named in anthropologist Werbner’s *The Migration Process*. Of course South Asians were not mere passive subjects of exploitation, but the study of these processes stresses the cultural in an ethnicist way, ignoring any analysis of contextualising circumstances. *The Migration Process* foregrounds an ethnographic gaze blinded in its micro exoticism to the wider realities that perhaps only politicised groups could tackle. It is a matter of record that anthropologists preferred to study kinship and culture while activists stressed struggle and exploitation. Ignoring left wing political activity with a vengeance, Werbner herself starts out by noting that the literature on South Asians in Britain is not clear on ‘how people have organized themselves to resist being passive victims’ and notes that ‘forms of cultural resistance vary from community to community’ (Werbner, 1990, p. 6). However, her interest is primarily in symbolic and culturalist categories and she fails to mention either the Indian or the Pakistani Workers Association, or any level of class or political association (beyond reference to anthropological notions of the ‘big man’ (p. 310)) and prefers to quote anthropologists like Gluckman and Mauss (much) rather than engage with Marx or Marxist influences (never).

It is not as if Werbner is unaware of the politics of South Asian organization in Britain, it’s just that anthropologists have somehow been inclined to ignore this aspect as part of a rush to rustic and ethnic caricature. It is interesting that the use of anthropology to study people within the West aimed to break a division of labour between sociology and anthropology in which the former discipline had focussed upon ‘advanced societies’ and anthropology had monopoly over ‘the Rest of the World’. But by deploying anthropology to examine South Asians in Britain without acknowledgement of political articulation and organization, a re-fashioned othering ‘at home’ marks the South Asian presence out as a scandalous interruption of the ‘Rest’ within the West. This South Asian interruption then opens up the possibility of constant refrains about the fundamental illegitimacy of settlement as a threat to the coherence of the nation—exactly one of the key areas of South Asian organizational work. Sadly, this was not of interest to anthropology, as old school exoticism was imported whole from the colonial theatre. Sasha Josephides faults the two early anthropological studies of the pre-1970s Indian Workers Association, identified in her 1991 essay (the reference is to Desai, 1963 and John, 1969), with a methodological individualism derived from Frederick Bailey’s *Strategems and Spoils* (1969), Mayer’s ‘action sets’ (1966) and models of social organization approaches made popular by Fredrik Barth (1966). In offering an alternative to these approaches (Josephides, 1991, p. 253), the possibility of a more adequate comprehension of the story of the IWA was promised. Unfortunately this beginning was not developed and the culturalist-

ethnicist hegemony prevailed in anthropological work 'at home'. Gerd Bauman is one of the few (tenured) anthropologists writing in the 1990s to mention the IWA at all—in his study of Southall entitled *Contesting Culture* (1996)—yet even here the focus is on fairly old school anthropological notions of community and negotiation. There does seem to be an injunction against taking any contemporary tone in analysis of the South Asian contribution to the United Kingdom.

Asian workers 'at home' have been organized, culturally and politically, and have provided a critique of anthropological categorisation themselves by focusing on political and organizational issues. It is salutary to find that the communist or Marxist-inspired authors and activists that should be discussed here were able to provide a critique of eurocentric models of social science writing long before such critiques—under the guise of reflexive anxiety and postmodern doubt—became common rhetoric within the social sciences as taught in white institutions. The need to challenge slavish mimicry of received versions of positivist and quantitative sociology, or exoticist and primitivist anthropology, has been nurtured amongst militant organizations much more than can be said of the credentialist teaching factories we call universities. A watchful vigilance against the pitfalls of complicity in surveillance knowledge production and the seductions of token-incorporation should not mean non-participation in those still-dominant institutions—only that such participation is best thought of, and practised, first as critical and oppositional. In contradistinction to a culture of liberal alibi, the non-token stance is not to enact left posturing within the colleges, but to institute pathways and openings for further critical gains that refuse to replicate voyeuristic scholarship—collaborative critical production projects, cross-sectoral alliances, campaign-based resourcing and knowledge production is far more useful than merely interpreting the world according to hitherto existing structures. How to avoid voyeuristic replication of the anthro-gaze? Place South Asians in the subject, not the object, position in your research. How does the world look if seen from the position of British South Asians, and what can we learn from that? Not how does the white world look when invaded by exotic-fanatic, other worldly, inscrutable ethnics. Is it possible to re-orient (or dis-Orient) minds away from the demographic ethnographic and voyeuristic position and rethink the history of the metropolis as made by outsiders with an investment in coming inside without forgetting the co-constitutive origins of here and there, not just 'there'.

The unsung heroes of the Workers Movement and the communist tradition in the United Kingdom are many; more than the deployment of numerous sociologists and oral historians could possibly document in present circumstances. There are of course several high profile and well known names to be acknowledged—I've already mentioned them: Saklatvala, Palme-Dutt, Sivanandan himself—but the naming of names of course should not be offered without due recognition that without considerable support from anonymous comrades, tireless mill and factory worker-organizers, fellow travellers and family, there could be no communist movement at all.<sup>2</sup>

Not every South Asian migrant to Britain joined the communist party or some other left group, but the history of such struggles is known amongst the South Asian communities today and is ‘imbibed as if with mothers milk’ (‘Informant A,’ interview with author). How could anthropologists miss it? Largely because they have focussed their gaze upon relatively unformed sectors of the population—quite often school children—and read off culture from small survey samples. This can be seen for example in Mary Gillespie’s ethnographic study of school kids watching television in Southall (Hutnyk, 1996) and can be found again in Kathleen Hall’s (2002) study of Sikhs in Leeds—*Lives in Translation: Sikh Youth as British Citizens*—neither work managing to mention organized left activity, or organized anti-racism even as they discuss liberal stances on that theme, in their books.<sup>3</sup> Much like Gillespie, Hall deploys the terminology of ‘second generation’ and ‘caught between two cultures’ on the first pages of her study of Sikhs in Britain. By ‘second generation’ might we hear a kind of insistence that the people under investigation (all of them) are forever named as arrivees from elsewhere? Though approving of Homi Bhabha’s notion of third space and seeing hybridity as the place where migrant people (?) live their lives through acts of cultural translation, Hall also, briefly, approves Kaur and Kalra’s notion of Transl-asia (Hall, K., 2002, pp. 5, 142; Kaur & Kalra, 1996), but perhaps misses the ironic and critical dimension to that intervention. Clearly for Kaur and Kalra, Transl-asia does not equal third space hybridity, but also explicitly underlines the political and debated context of varied responses to these translated discussions and their context in multi-racist Britain.<sup>4</sup> In studies like this, the characterisation of people who ‘arrived’ in the UK some 30 years before publication as either school children or ‘second generation’ is not merely empirical in its consequences—as a study of Sikhs, or even Sikh youth, it leaves much aside. Perhaps because the fieldwork was conducted so long before publication (it is, she says, a study marked by Thatcherism), the attached afterword mention of racial violence in Oldham and Bradford in the summer of 2001 (K. Hall, 2002, p. 204) adds little to counter the impression in the main text that white anthropologists working on South Asians ‘at home’ see them primarily as visitors ‘over here’. Certainly only a few historical studies of organized left Asians are available (and it is because Hall, Werbner, Gillespie are not interested in the left that these are most often biographies of great leaders written by academic fellow travellers without ethnographic skills, though the survey of Visram (2002) is of impressive scope). In most cases, however, any notion of Asian left organization is excluded or actively avoided (fear of restless natives perhaps?). It is particularly astonishing that Hall manages an entire book on Sikhs in Britain without mention of the IWA—and though it would not be enough to simply correct the record with the great names history of that organization, studies that are no longer beholden to uncritical tropes of anthropology would actually be a start. It might be a chance to move beyond the pathologies of myopic interpretation and comprehension; the point would be to change the ways ethnography represents.

There are a few South Asian writers who escape the apparent anthropological agreement to avoid examination of everyday political associations. As already

mentioned, there were and are vast differences among South Asians in terms of participation in organized political groupings, just as there is in the population in general. Kalra shows that there has been considerable union and other organization of South Asian labour from the earliest days of settlement in Britain (Kalra, 2000a, p. 122). Although participation by black workers in workplace Union organizations was substantial, 'their incorporation into the wider union movement was not' (p. 117). It is certainly the case that a majority of workers only come in contact with their unions when some issue particular to their own employment necessitates representation, but this too reflects the general case. What accounts for the disarticulation of South Asian unionization in particular with the wider union movement in general if not racism? This is yet another parallel that obscures history and fails to normalise understandings in an exotico-fanatic vein. At any rate workplace Union participation is not to be ignored as it is in the ethnographic literature.

The exposure of the anthropological and sociological construction of South Asian migrant workers malleability, acquiescence and compliance, of their putting up 'with unattractive work if it is temporary and they have an alternative life to return to' (Kalra, 2000a, p. 20) is well taken. What this construction does is deflect scholarly attention away from the varied ways in which South Asian agency and political engagement—in the workplace, in terms of class, race and indeed culture—does manifest itself and is not convincingly rejected with an anthropological *laissez faire* view where 'black workers are assumed to lack the cultural and political resources with which to adapt to the customs of the industrial workforce' (p. 20).

This is reinforced by Kalra's analysis of the 'myth of return' thesis (2000a, p. 19) which has it that South Asian workers in Britain retained an ever less likely ideology of wanting to return to their countries of origin. Proponents of this line of explanation saw migrants as having limited political engagement because they saw themselves as resident in a 'host' country (Kalra, 2000a, p. 19, Anwar, 1979). Kalra finds examples in Rose (1969) and again repeated 20 years later in Werbner (1990, p. 7). The inference that should be drawn however is not that migrants were politically conservative. The monolithic 'myth of return', like its later counterpart the 'second generation' problem, insists that a migrant is a migrant is a migrant—and by implication really belongs elsewhere, overseas, over there in their proper home. Revealingly, as Kalra's usage demonstrates, the terminology of ethnicist scholarship insists on migration, not settlement. An anthropology predestined to insist on this myth is not far from the more explicit racism of the 'paki go home' politics of the National Front and BNP.

### Sketches

Who then were the South Asians who not only did not 'go home' but who stayed 'here' because the British were 'there' and who refused to fall into the trap of ignoring the co-constitution of here and there as a factor in the political, cultural and



economic circumstances of contemporary Britain? These were the people who organized politically as South Asians and as Communists in trades union, in anti-racist groups and in party formations. There is much work that could be done by a reconfigured anthropology on these matters. It is only an indicative survey, a kind of initial listing or a first register of issues for examination that will be attempted here—the names mentioned are not exhaustive and offer only a kind of red interlude and reminder. As already mentioned, the list of the great and the good as found in published biography are never the full story. I would argue for a wider range of studies that would pay different kinds of attention to political organization, and would do so in a variety of ways. There will be opportunity later to set out the research program for a wider appreciation.

**Shapurji Saklatvala** was first elected to the British parliament in 1922, standing as member of the Labour Party, though never secretive about being a communist. He was nephew of the Tata business empire and married Sally Marsh in Oldham, after being sent to England in 1905, where he became a friend of Sylvia Pankhurst. By 1907 he was a member of the Marxist group the Social Democratic Foundation—a forerunner of the Communist Party of Great Britain, the CPGB (Wadsworth, 1998, pp. 23–24)—and sought a position in representative politics in Battersea. The Labour Party of course had reservations about endorsing someone associated with the Communist Party, but sanctioned his candidature on condition that he accept the Labour whip and constitution—‘the first and only time the Labour Party endorsed a Communist Party member for a parliamentary seat’ (Wadsworth, 1998, p. 42). In 1924 the Labour Party had taken a decision to expel communists from their party and Saklatvala then won his seat running as a communist. He was imprisoned in 1926 for sedition, at the time of the general strike. As the Labour Party excluded him, the Tories chanted ‘send him back to India’ as well as ‘send him back to Moscow’. Saklatvala indeed departed for a successful tour of India, greeted by well wishers wherever he spoke as a fighter against the imperialist power. Interestingly, he was criticised by the founder of the Indian Communist Party, M.N. Roy, for hanging about with Gandhi during the visit. Though his was never uncritical support, as Saklatvala questioned the Mahatma’s promotion of khaddar in terms that stressed the importance of egalitarian worker’s organization—at one public meeting stressing that the jute workers in Dundee had to realise the urgent need ‘of making the Bengal jute workers as well as the Bengal jute growers, a part and parcel of the British Jute Workers’ Federation, demanding a six hour day and £5 a week minimum wages, whether the factory be in Dundee or Calcutta’ (in Wadsworth, 1998, p. 55). This position of proletarian internationalism clearly goes an organizational step further than Gandhi’s photo opportunity with Oldham’s mill workers in the 1930s. Amusingly, in a letter to Gandhi, Saklatvala made the point that it seemed contradictory to encourage people in spinning, so as to make more clothes, at the same time as giving the example of wearing less and less himself. Saklatvala’s visits to India were curtailed when the Government revoked his passport, with the Secretary of State for India, William Wedgewood Benn confirming the ban in 1929 in what has

come to be known as ‘ghastly imperialist mode’ (William Wedgewood was the father of Tony Benn) (pp. 68–70). Saklatvala’s call for the CPGB to organize at the ports among Asian seamen was ignored in much the same way as the white left today has failed to take up the cause of Asylum Seekers and refugees. Yet his influence upon the rank and file cadre was immense. Visram reports that Bengali workers celebrated Saklatvala Day in 1937 and British communists fought in the Saklatvala Battalion in the Spanish Civil War (Visram, 2002, p. 319). When Saklatvala died, George Padmore paid him tribute, along with Nehru and Palme Dutt.

**Rajani Palme Dutt**, first cousin of the Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme, via his mother Anne, was born in 1896 at Cambridge. Rajani and his bother Clemens were both involved in left-wing politics at university, with Rajani being expelled from Oxford in 1917 for refusing conscription into the army—though he did eventually take out a first class degree. Palme Dutt started the CPGB’s theoretical journal *Labour Monthly* in 1921, editing it for more than 50 years, with two years—1936–38—as editor of *The Daily Worker* and more than 40 years on the Central Committee. He unsuccessfully ran in Birmingham as a communist for the parliament in 1945 and in 1950. He died in 1974.

As it was for Palme Dutt and Saklatvala in the 1920s, it remains important today to make the connection between anti-colonialism and the struggle for emancipation ‘at home’. Imperialism overseas is co-constituted with inequalities in the domestic sphere. The one bound up with the other, neither resolvable alone. Palme Dutt opposed the First World War as ‘an imperialist abomination’ (Callaghan, 1993, p. 14), and this at a time when there was even less support than an anti-war voice would have today. Palme Dutt led the way, though many did not realise how much it was in their interests to follow.

Along with Saklatvala, Palme Dutt insisted that the leadership of Lenin was important because the old Bolshevik had made imperialism a key focus of revolutionary struggle. The Comintern was the vehicle of an organized anti-colonialism. It is important not to forget how much this meant for people in India, Malaya, Indonesia, China and other subjugated colonies, and also how it resonated with the diverse British working class, and how such alliance and interest in internationalism continues today (albeit usually depoliticized under studies of cultural diasporas).

**Udham Singh**: When arrested for shooting dead former Amritsar Governor Michael O’Dwyer in 1940, Udham Singh gave his name as Mohamad Singh Azad, signifying a Muslim–Sikh alliance for freedom (Visram, 2002, p. 272). His name was recently celebrated in song by Asian Dub Foundation on their album R.A.F.I. (1998, see Hutnyk, 2000) though it is unusual to hear the name mentioned in British anthropology or sociology (but see Clark, 1975; Kalra, 2000b).

These few figures, however, are the old names. There are many more that remain unacknowledged, and it is the task of historians, commentators activists and students to write these stories without reaching out to exoticist categories. The tale of the Southall Indian Workers Association for example is not only its relation to Indian-

based political groupings but also its relations to the British Communist tradition and issues of separate or joint organization. Should black organizations organize separately from the white left given the historical propensity of that left—mostly in its Trotskyite variants—to see black organizations as areas for recruitment and for ‘parachuting in’ to do publicity for their own campaigns? What are the requisite organizational forms which can fight the co-constituted violence of imperialism there and racism here, based as it is on the modern fantasy of the nation state as sole arbiter of population and border control for the purposes of capitalist production.<sup>5</sup> Alongside such questions, there might be room for research investigation of the issues raised by Tariq Mehmood in his novel *Where there is Light* (2003) that would require interrogation of police actions tracking South Asian activists in Bradford and other northern towns. The relation of South Asian organizations and various associated activisms to the reformist populism of the Labour Party, including its ‘Black Sections’ deserves continued attention, as does the activity of various anti-deportation campaigns, asylum-seeker support, immigration group work in general and community self-defence organization (see *Dis-Orienting Rhythms* for some discussion of this last theme in particular, Sharma *et al.*, 1996).

Would ethnographic and documentary history not find fitting subjects in the formation of the Black People’s Alliance and responses to Enoch Powell’s ‘Rivers of blood’ speech? The participation of South Asian activists in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and other anti-imperialism struggles as well as campaigns against apartheid in South Africa remain to be written. In struggles like these people were ‘not fighting for culture’, in Sivanandan’s phrase, and not likely to sell out to the management of racism inaugurated in the wake of the Scarman Report—which was at least engaged with to some degree by the early Birmingham Cultural Studies School (in anticipation of this management, see Hall *et al.*, 1978). It is a matter of record, however, that Cultural Studies in general has abandoned this more political terrain, and the morphing of anthropology with that discipline is part of the problem. Scholarship becomes popular in inverse proportion to its irritant charge and the establishment of anthropology at home and a cross-disciplinary take up of a bland ethnicist ethnography is symptomatic. It cannot be left just to magazines like *Lalkar*, newspaper of the IWA (GB), and *Spark*, by the Youth Wing of the Socialist Labour Party, to make the agitational moves.

Sivanandan himself offers a sketch of part of this missing history in his essay ‘From resistance to rebellion’, but doing history always takes second place to activist engagement. Siva was a member of the Black Unity and Freedom Party. As editor of *Race and Class*, organizer-director of the IRR, as campaigning public speaker and as accomplished novelist, he spent many years advising and involved with anti-racist and working class struggles—the special issue full of tributes to his work (*Race and Class*) attests to this. It was probably not an unusual occurrence, then, when Sivanandan abandoned his prepared speech to launch an attack on a fellow panellist at a conference marking the 50th anniversary of the 6th Pan African Congress meeting in Manchester, the indication to many in the audience was that political

struggle remained more important than either personality or the polite protocols of scholarly decorum. It was to the palpable relief of activists in the audience that Siva railed against hapless anthropological-cum-exoticist assumptions in treatment of the history of pan-Africanism as a culturalist curio rather than a *political* legacy.

Like Saklatvala, Sivanandan's politics were never specific to South Asian interests, but without departing from those interests he also took up the interests of the entirety of humanity and so entered into debates on themes as diverse as technological change and the 'silicon age' in the capitalist production process; the 'hokum' of New Times thinking in the reinvention of the British Labour Party (as 'Thatcherism in drag'); on South Africa; teaching; and globalisation, as well as self-defence work; racism; Sri Lanka and imperialism.

The issues are important and resonate today. The themes need to be contextualized not in terms of ethnic organization as such, but related to the narrative of changes to labour force/class composition and imperialist restructuring after so called globalization (sweatshops, off-shore labour, mill closures, service sector and the class struggle). Unexhausted and inexhaustible histories remain to be documented and to inspire. Tales for that scene round the kitchen table, tales for the summer afternoon. The work to be done builds communities of resistance with memories. The simple and undeniably normal fact that South Asians of all stripes have been involved in left activity in Britain was and remains a key to the politics of this country. Whether it be the current conjuncture and the mobilization against the war on Iraq and the anti-terror persecutions of the paranoid Blair Government, or the anti-racist movements of the 1970s and the 1990s, in struggles around workplace conditions and exploitation of cheap labour (Grundwick, Hillingdon), or other examples, South Asians can be counted. In each of these cases and more, without romanticizing, South Asian engagement in politics in Britain has as often as not taken a simultaneously anti-racist and anti-colonialist cross-sectoral orientation. This reaches back even to the long time ago core participation in the Communist Party of Great Britain of Rajani Palme Dutt, and in the Comintern by Dutt and M. N. Roy, and even to the beginnings of anti-colonialism in general, and working class politics in particular, Menon, Saklatvala, so many others.

Faced with racist and class confrontation every day, situated in contexts of prejudicial attack and the struggles, and contradictions, of class mobility, there is a diverse range of political awareness to be tapped among the South Asian community that seems less readily accessible for white youth unless they retain a specifically 'working class' formation. Even then this can often take reactionary form in any community. The trouble with the available documentation on South Asian experience in Britain is that those making such documentation have not been interested in political and organized responses to racism so much as a kind of liberal celebration of their own anti-racist credentials—it must be mentioned—which then transmutes and transforms Asian agency to the machineries of anthropological categorisation.

The studies available of contemporary British Asians—Werbner, *et al.*—hardly ever mention the communist contribution to the history of struggles against racism, or other modes of oppression in capitalist Britain, in the terms articulated by those involved in such struggles. Bauman sometimes does, Gillespie and Hall not at all. Admittedly, the available biographical histories of the communist left may sometimes be more alert, but they are always couched in the context of great names. The text of Visram's *Asians in Britain* is an exception, but it stops far too early. Reconstructed ethnographers need now be deployed.

### Looking Forward: 'A Homeless Anthropology'

The question to ask might be not what are these Asian settlers doing, but, knowing something of the struggles for which they devoted their lives, can this knowledge vouchsafed to scholars, commentators, critics, be transmuted into learning and motivation, or must it add merely to the edification of inmates of the administered bland of the academia-industrial-infotainment complex? There is an imperative that is more important than prestige and sales, and that is not to become apologists by imitation, capitulating to the paradigms and perspectives of imperialist social science like loyal coolies or the compradore class of old.

Against a surveillance knowledge production on Asians, there is already a critique built into working-class history, and twisting it towards identity politics or ethnicist ends does a disservice. That this ethnicist anthropology is taught for all intents and purposes in unchanged (Malinowskian) form to the increasing numbers of black students entering the universities is as ironic as it is perverse. To note the limited number of black graduates that continue into the teaching profession at research level is to recognize a grand disparity and suggests provocative questions: for example, would it be possible to imagine a black British anthropology?<sup>6</sup> It would not be a surprise to find the only condition for such an anthropology to thrive would be if it reproduced the platitudes and certitudes of an imperial anthropology of the Rest, now with 'coloured' practitioners, alongside the usual 'at home' exoticism of minority and 'second generation' migrant surveillance.

The cultivation of what Sivanandan once called 'a class of collaborators' who would be useful in 'the political control of a rebellious 'second generation' (Sivanandan, 1982, p. 101) is not obviously countered by simple celebration of the commitment and contribution of South Asian comrades in Britain. Obviously there are interests vested in such a 'class' on the part of anthropologists and on the part of 'identity politicians' the promotion of such positions cannot remain innocently unremarked. It is however the case that if these narratives are not set out as either role models or nostalgia, they might possibly serve to indicate the diversity and complexity of South Asian experience in Britain, as elsewhere. The story might also show how the reductive type casting so beloved of 'identity politics', as with collaboration and even complicity with the avowed enemy racist stereotyping, does not match how things are for those who look closely and with eyes open.

Sivanandan was among the first to recognize that the personalised politics of identity was dangerous in that this identity politics can sometimes morph into an apolitical 'postcolonialism' in the metropolitan centres and remain wilfully ignorant of politics on the other side of the international division of labour. Gayatri Spivak (1999) also usefully targets the ways in which arrivee settlers cloak themselves in the comforts of an accommodatationist migrancy or multiculturalism, making the 'postcolonial' a problematic category. Who benefits here? What is served by an erudition that remains in comfort in the elite salon? As Brennan points out, a radicalism of belief survives, though those radicals of the activist Left are more often found 'hibernating in academia' (Brennan, 1999, p. 26) and especially in anthropology and in cultural studies: that place which Gargi Bhattacharyya calls one of the 'most well-meaning sections of higher education' (Bhattacharyya, 1998, p. 56). From here, there is no guarantee that the deployment of fieldworkers to document the activities of the masses of South Asians involved in political work would necessarily mean this work was immune from the publishing industry and corresponding tenure system that thrives on making product, not politics. Kalra refers to 'a bludgeoning of literature about Muslims in Britain' that has emerged in academia since 1990 (Kalra, 2000a, p. 196). This onslaught gained sales, if not spectacular impetus, in the post-September 11 book market as publishers fell over themselves to supply shelves with any back title that mentioned Islam or Afghanistan. The quality of this work is of course mixed; the purpose for which it is now read is often different to that with which it was written. In this context the problem with anthropological approaches to cultural groups in Britain is much the same as the problem of white left approaches—a homogenising project of knowing that ignores agency and ignores wider geo-political implications. Here, the Black and White Unite and Fight slogan is important so long as it is not merely a slogan that substitutes for critical analysis—as Sivanandan had pointed out with the 'over here over there' couplet. To market publications that are unashamedly open to be read as 'ethnic' or 'identity' documentary reportage is little different from the exoticist-fanaticist routines of the tabloid press.

The production of knowledge of South Asian popular culture in the UK should no longer be driven by antiquated anthropological concerns that recycle metaphors of caste, tribe and village to account for South Asian settlers in a so-called 'advanced' capitalist society. The old mission of an anthropology at home is now forever obsolete. Those who maintain its ghost are orientalism's latter-day profiteers, the comprador class and its calculating employers, working in the teaching factory, replicating their own system themselves. In contradistinction to this, it might be plausible to write the story of South Asian political engagement in the UK in a different way. To collect moments of South Asian popular culture in Britain in a more radical register—one that did not minimise agency in favour of categories (from Gluckman, Bailey, *etc.*)—to hold together the multiple locations of diaspora without imposing an origin-ist or anthro-exoticist privilege to geographical South Asia itself. Along the way to link up a politics that made more than historical niceties out of a

history of struggle. The ‘subcontinent’ is involved, but it is not by any means always the key geographical or political, or even cultural, co-ordinate to be considered. Communist histories may be co-constituted in multiple ways—the project to realise these histories remains to be done.

This text schematises such a project, which continues yet to begin.

## Notes

- [1] The ‘Asian’ in the ‘British Asian’ of this article’s title refers (problematically) to the geo-global and conceptual space of diasporic South Asia. The concomitant silencing of other Asias in Britain—the Chinese, Southeast Asians, Islam etc.—is a consequence of terminological colonisation that remains to be undone. Thanks are due to Sarah Watson, Tia Chowdhury, Sivanandan, Tariq Mehmood, Bobby Sayyid and Virinder Kalra for comments that have helped get this project started as it should continue.
- [2] This is possibly the most convenient place to admit I have a personal investment here. The argument that it was as stokers on British Merchant Navy ships that Pakistanis, specifically Mirpuris, first initiated chain migration to Britain, (Kahn, 1977; Ballard, 1987, p. 24; Kalra, 2000a, p. 63) is interesting to me particularly as my grandfather Thomas Moat Tate was a stoker in that same navy himself during the second imperialist war and often told stories of the camaraderie, and racism, among those below decks. Not wanting to buy into the argument that (Azad) Kashmiri migration begins with the stokers leaving their ships to work in munitions factories (the overall significance of which Kalra disputes as a mythic foundation for the ‘chain migration’ thesis), I nonetheless hope to support this critique by publishing my grandfather’s memoirs one day (imperialist history resides in most closets, none can deny it).
- [3] Written with a wider brief, yet in no significant way does the anthropological approach of K. Hall advance on that of Gillespie, published eight years earlier. The school setting, the camaraderie via knowing transgression, the selective interviews and the realist ethnographic convention remains pretty much the same. Hall seems slightly more alert to issues of power, and is unduly obsessed with turbans, but there is not much to distinguish her study from the many other anthropological reports on the children of diaspora in that it does little to address the redistributive justice so much needed and so often articulated by those Asian organizations that the likes of Gillespie and Hall choose to ignore. At least Hall can recognize some ‘campaign’ activity in her (brief) discussion of the efforts to get Punjabi language classes onto the curriculum at her school. But we have to ask just what it is that makes anthropologists so keen to generalise on culture from the basis of a handful of interviews with school aged teenagers—why pick on the kids? Clearly authority plays it part.
- [4] Kalra’s essay in *Theory, Culture and Society* (2000b) on non-translation makes this political aspect even more pertinent. All the same, Hall’s appreciation of the work of the trans-Asia group is welcome.
- [5] On the primary role of the nation state here see Angela Mitropoulos who argues that the ‘refugee problem . . . [is] . . . the greatest challenge to the principle role of the nation state: the “right” of nation states (whether as one nation or “united” nations) to allocate, regulate and control bodies for the purposes of capitalist production’ (Mitropoulos, 2001).
- [6] A test to gauge the elimination of racism from British Anthropology might be to ask this hypothetical and fantasy question: What if, in just one department anywhere in the system, or a newly formed department, exactly no Anglo-Saxon, white, anthropologists were involved in any way with the teaching of the discipline, yet all the tasks of teaching anthropology were performed by fully accredited and qualified British Anthropologists,

*i.e.*, by black or Asian British anthropologists? Can such a scenario be imagined and would this department still be considered to teach 'British' Social Anthropology? Would it be considered a British department? People will dismiss this as impossible, impracticable, and unworkable—they might say there is not the staff, no new departments are planned, it would be a ghetto, it would cause 'imbalances', separatism, etc. But the abstract absurdity of even suggesting a black Anthropology Department indicates that white supremacy prevails as normalcy, as a never challenged standard and essential core. Race is the criteria for ensuring a 'proper' representation among the teaching staff—which is to say, race is used as criteria for exclusion of at least one possibility—an all black, all British department—and at best a tolerant tokenistic mix might be approved. Why would it be so unimaginable to appoint ten black Britons to one anthropology department in Britain? For those who think critically about knowledge and politics, the impossibility of a Black Anthropology means only that the entire system, disciplinary forms and protocols, appointments, teaching programs and curricula, must be done away with—anything less maintains an unexamined white supremacy that will never relinquish its presumptuous right to rule.

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