

# The 'diversity of diversity': Cohesion, integration, and social mobility amongst British Asians

**LSE** [blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2012/09/03/cohesion-integration-and-social-mobility-amongst-british-asians/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2012/09/03/cohesion-integration-and-social-mobility-amongst-british-asians/)

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*A recent LSE roundtable examined the concepts of cohesion and integration as they pertain to British-born Asians in London, specifically the Hindu Bengali community in Tower Hamlets.*

There are many faces of Asians in London, including skilled Indian middle-class migrants from the 1960s; working class Bangladeshi Muslims from Sylhet in East London who manage curry houses on Brick Lane; Punjabi immigrants who have settled and created 'Little India' in Southall, Hounslow, and Harrow; and radicalised British-born Pakistanis who carried out the London bombings in July 2005.

To examine these disparate communities that are all reduced to the term 'British Asian', the LSE Annual Fund sponsored a one-day workshop entitled 'Second-generation British-Asian Experiences in London: Diversity, conflict and cohesion'. The roundtable, held at LSE on 29 May, brought together key policymakers and researchers to discuss the intersection of concepts of cohesion, integration, and social mobility as they pertain to British-born Asians in London. In particular, the roundtable focused on a pilot study examining the Hindu Bengali community in Tower Hamlets. (See [the complete roundtable report](#) for details of the Tower Hamlets case study; a summary of policies from the Greater London Authority and Harrow relevant to British-born Asians; a discussion of the impact of socio-economic class differences on British-Asian cohesion; and a list of further readings.)



In the London borough of Tower Hamlets, the Council and academics have carried out extensive research on British-born Muslim Bengalis, since Bangladeshis comprise approximately 40 per cent of the local population. This research has found that British-born Muslim Bengalis in the borough show low levels of cohesion, social mobility, and integration. However, a pilot study presented at the LSE roundtable suggests that Hindu Bengalis in Tower Hamlets have high levels of social mobility and cohesion, with low levels of social integration. This finding challenges the prevailing policy consensus that sees 'integration' as a catalyst for cohesion and social mobility,

since British-born Hindu Bengalis in Tower Hamlets exhibit cohesion without integration.

The differences between Muslim and Hindu Bengalis deserve examination in the broader context of a shared British Asian experience. The first generation of Asian migrants in the 1960s and '70s experienced virulent and occasionally violent racism, and different communities galvanised activism around the umbrella term of 'Asian' during the anti-racism movement, not as a cultural designation, but as an empowering political coalition.

In addition to this common history of racism, British Asian communities continue to share experiences in the present day. For example, though British Asian communities may be integrated into the workforce per se, they nonetheless find that there is an earnings 'glass ceiling'. One roundtable attendee said that research has found that the most successful individuals of Asian descent – including high prestige professions such as medical doctors – will still earn 25 per cent less on average than their white British counterparts. Thus, across the board, British-born Asians face difficulties in achieving full integration into the labour force.

Despite these shared experiences, roundtable participants agreed that there is a greater desire among British Asians to express more nuanced identities by ethno-linguistic group or religion, which reflects interestingly on cohesion and integration.

For instance, the roundtable participants felt that the aspiration to return was a significant factor in explaining different levels of cohesion, integration and mobility between Muslim and Hindu Bengalis in Tower Hamlets. In the Muslim Bengali community in East London, the first generation wanted to return to the homeland, and would speak about eventually returning to Bangladesh. By contrast, Hindu Bengalis left Bangladesh, sometimes as persecuted minorities in a Muslim-majority country, to establish a new life in the UK. Thus, there is no 'homeland' to go back to, providing Hindu Bengalis with a greater incentive to integrate in the UK. Interestingly, the pilot study found that Hindu Bengalis associate with India, not Bangladesh. Moreover, in the self-identification question in the survey, more respondents placed 'British' as their primary identity, just ahead of 'Indian'. Thus, there is a little or no identification with being Bangladeshi.

Features of the anti-racism movement of the 1960s and '70s perhaps explain one of the more intriguing findings of the Hindu Bengali pilot study. Choosing between the terms 'Asian', 'Bengali', 'British', 'Hindu', and 'Indian' for self-identification, respondents felt least affinity for the term 'Asian', since they found it to have negative connotations—particularly in mass media. Since British Hindus were less active during the anti-racism movement, there is no strong political history of conflict with the state, and there is no political cultural barrier to working for the Establishment, such as large banks in the City run predominantly by white managers.

Additionally, roundtable participants felt the Hindu Bengalis of Tower Hamlets avoid the term 'Asian' in order to distinguish themselves from other British Asians, particularly Muslim Bengalis. This desire to be distinct likely results from the fact that many parts of London have large British Asian populations and there is sufficient critical mass to express more nuanced identities. Moreover, compared to their parents, British-born Asians do not have a language barrier and thus have the confidence to integrate into the UK. In other words, the 'defensive' identity of 'Asian' is replaced by more 'proactive' assertions of integration and nuanced ethno-linguistic or religious identities.

That said, roundtable participants noted that there are cultural forms that seek to bring together disparate British Asian voices. For example, the *Disorienting Rhythms* collection on Asian urban music showed that there was a shared notion of an identity that drew on the Homeland and the UK. In this context, the term British Asian has been replaced by the word *desi*, which translates as 'local' in Hindi, though it refers to a transnational identity of those from the Subcontinent not born in the 'Homeland'—and has replaced the term *pardesi* (foreigner). However, there are also complex constructions about those who can be *desi*, and who cannot, and the term has been co-opted mainly by those of North Indian origin, and those outside London.

In conclusion, the LSE roundtable emphasised the importance of appreciating the 'diversity of diversity' within the British Asian community by not focusing on 'Asians' in London as a uniform entity, and instead being aware of

possible patterns of exclusion by ethno-linguistic group, religion, class, gender, or generation.

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