

# South Asian Heritage Month A personal perspective

Gautam Bhattacharyya



## **South Asian Heritage Month (SAHM) in the UK is an important opportunity to celebrate and honour all of those from a South Asian background who have contributed so significantly to all aspects of our life and culture in the UK.**

Now in its third year, the SAHM theme for 2022 is Journeys of Empire. Gautam Bhattacharyya, Reed Smith executive committee member, partner since 2000, chair of the firm's India business team and international arbitration lawyer, shares his views on this annual celebration.

Those of South Asian heritage can, in short, trace their backgrounds and history to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. But, contrary to some perceptions, those of South Asian origin have not just settled in and contributed to the UK since after the Second World War. Records and research, for example, in an excellent 2002 book by Rozina Visram called *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History*, do a great deal to explain just how much impact those of South Asian origin have had in the UK.

I remember buying Ms Visram's book about 20 years ago, primarily because I did not feel that I knew enough about this area of history. I would recommend the book to anyone interested in knowing more about the contributions and activities of South Asians in the UK.

There is no doubt that the history of South Asians in the UK is closely linked to the history of Britain as a global colonial, seafaring and trading power.

Ms Visram's book records that the first baptism in London of someone of Indian origin took place in 1616, and that from about the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the First World War in 1914 there was a significant population of South Asian origin living in Britain. It is of immense pride, but perhaps not well known enough, that many armed forces service personnel from South Asia served for the Allied forces during the First and Second World Wars, several of whom made the ultimate sacrifice.

There have been very significant contributions and investments by those of South Asian origin to businesses in the UK in a number of sectors, and these include several well-known household names.

Several of South Asian extraction have become members of parliament in the UK and, regardless of their politics, have risen to either cabinet or shadow cabinet roles. The Mayor of London, now in his second term, is of South Asian origin. In sport, too, we have seen powerful contributions. England cricket, for example, in both its test match and shorter formats, has had a number of prominent contributors over the years from South Asian backgrounds. I also recall vividly the importance of players of South Asian origin in Great Britain's men's hockey team in winning gold at the 1988 Olympics.

Ms Visram's book records that a number of lawyers of South Asian origin studied and practised in Britain from at least the mid-1800s onwards. We can only imagine how challenging it would have been for those trailblazers. If we look to the present day, we have several successful and prominent Queen's Counsel and barristers, major law firm partners and solicitors, and senior in-house lawyers of South Asian heritage. Turning to the current judiciary in England and Wales, we can admire the achievements of the Court of Appeal's Lord Justice Singh and the High Court's Mr Justice Saini and Mr Justice Choudhary. There will inevitably be many more to come of South Asian heritage who thrive in the law and who will be able to stand on the shoulders of those who came before them.

It is very fitting that SAHM gives us the opportunity to highlight the contributions of South Asian Britons in all walks of our life in the UK and to champion and encourage all those who will continue the tradition of richly contributing to all that makes our country truly great.



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Gautam specializes in international commercial arbitration and litigation across a broad number of areas. He is a member of Reed Smith's global board, its Executive Committee, has been a partner in the firm since 2000 and is the former managing partner of Reed Smith's Singapore office. Gautam also chairs Reed Smith's India business team.

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