A Brief History of British 'Race' Politics and the Settlement of the Maisuria Family [1]

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ABSTRACT This article traces 'race' policy and practice in Britain and flags up seminal moments from the 1960s onwards. Although settlement of Asian, Black and other minority ethnic immigrants can be traced back to 1948 with the arrival of the *SS Empire Windrush* from the Caribbean, it is in the 1960s that 'race' became most visible in parliamentary politics. The article tackles each decade individually, highlighting events and laws that have shaped and defined macro policy and also the micro experiences of the Maisuria family. It is argued that it is of huge importance to establish a connection between macro politics and micro struggles in a liberal democracy to see how the policy of the state links with lived lives.

1960s

In 1962 the Commonwealth Immigrants Act was passed by Parliament to put upper limits on the number of new Commonwealth immigrants entering Britain. The gradual increase in the number of immigrants finding a new life in Britain stirred national debates in public houses and Parliament about the 'colour flood'. The popularity of the distasteful television programme *The Black and White Minstrel Show* exemplified the mood of many people in Britain. Social apartheid was visible in society. 'No Irish, No Blacks and No Dogs' was the sign that hung outside many establishments such as pubs and letting agents. Although the first race relations legislation was passed in 1965, aimed at easing tensions between the new settlers and native Britons, three years later MP Enoch Powell said, 'as I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood'. This Speech exacerbated a climate of racism, and sparked radical right-wing factions and white working-class people to take to the streets, provoking violent clashes with police and anti-facist and anti-racist campaigners (see Cole & Virdee, 2006).

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Also, in 1968, three years after Kenya had gained independence, the Maisuria family decided that the only way to keep their British status was to emigrate to Britain. Jayantilal Maisuria (Jai) left behind three very young children and a wife, whilst he travelled to England with less than nothing to find accommodation and lay the foundation of what became 'home'. In the motherland, Jai found life to be something of a culture shock. The streets were not paved with gold in Cambridge, and Jai decided on a move to Bradford where there was an emerging community of new arrivals from East Africa after President Idi Amin indulged in a campaign of ethnic cleansing in Uganda.

1970s

The increasing diversification of the population and continued social discomforts and economic inequalities meant that race equality was increasingly becoming a politically hot issue. In 1976, over 20 years after the first immigrants had settled, the Race Relations Act was enacted, and the Race Relations Board (now known as the Commission for Racial Equality) was established to protect Asian, Black and other minority ethnic people [2] from harassment and safeguard equality in areas such as employment and accommodation. However, this attempt at promoting racial harmony was undermined when 10 years after the 'Rivers of Blood Speech' came Margaret Thatcher's thinly veiled attack on the Asian, Black and other minority ethnic community. Thatcher remarked on a 'World in Action' television programme shown in January 1978 that 'people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture'.

A year after Thatcher's racist comments came the deaths of two Black men. Firstly, the events that surrounded the National Front Rally in Southall in April 1979 could not have better exemplified the structural racism that had begun to disease Britain. Blair Peach, a prominent anti-racism campaigner and teacher, was beaten to death by the police on an Anti-Nazi League (ANL) march that was demonstrating against the National Front Rally. The second incident of that year was the murder of Ruhullah Armesh who was chased and set upon by racists armed with industrial pipes (Steel, 2001). The fact that Ruhullah was an Afghan seeking refuge in Britain from his war-torn country exacerbates the sadness of this story.

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After reuniting all the members in early 1969, the Maisuria family decided to settle in Bradford. After various moves around the city (including a house in Manningham Lane which would become infamous for its social disturbances 30 years on), Jai settled his family in the Bradford Seven District with other new

arrivals from Africa, India and Pakistan. This was their home for the next 14 years. Wife Bhanumati had taken on the traditional role of mothering three young children and wifehood, whilst Jai got a job, like many immigrants, on the buses earning the family crust for the next 25 years.

1980s

This was the decade that saw the most serious racial disturbances ever in Britain. Brixton, Moss Side, Southall and Toxteth were the most troubled parts of the country, and for the first time ever, the police used CG gas on civilians to disperse the crowds (Steel, 2001). Although Margaret Thatcher laid much of the blame for the uprising on 'left-wing extremists' (Thatcher, 1993, p. 144), she agreed to commission an inquiry to find the roots of the dissent. Following the publication of Lord Scarman's Report, the Conservative Government introduced measures to safeguard equality with regard to police practice and police recruitment. It is, however, important to note that not all of the Scarman recommendations were accepted by the Thatcher Government.

In 1985 a committee of education specialists released the Swann Report with the title of *Education for All* attempting to explore the continuous underachievement of Asian, Black and other minority ethnic groups in education (Swann, 1985). The Report cited racism as a key barrier to educational success. It is noteworthy that this Report was originally entitled 'West Indian Children in Our Schools'; the 'our' was an oversight that exemplified the institutional racism and marginalization that blighted education and society as a whole (Gibson & Barrow, 1986). The Report is seen by many educationalists as a seminal point in the advent of multiculturalism in education.

The English football squad of the time included six black players. The *Daily Mail's* headline of 'our black magic' epitomised the attitude of the right-wing press. On the one hand, Asian, Black and other minority ethnic people were being vilified for 'diluting' the country's white culture and heritage; on the other, they were seen as 'one of us' and a valuable addition to the country.

The flagging confidence in the police after Blair Peach's death fuelled the clarion call from equality campaigners and the Scarman Report for an Independent Police Complaints Authority (IPCC, 2005). In 1985 the Police and Criminal Evidence Act provided this safeguard for Asian, Black and other minority ethnic people. The police for the first time could be held accountable and responsible for their actions; this was undoubtedly a giant leap forward in empowering those most vulnerable to police harassment – Asian, Black and other minority ethnic people.

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The eldest child, daughter Ranjan, was settled in to a factory job sewing clothes. Son Ashwin had become an apprentice electrician, and youngest son Ashish had just finished school. Rather than continue into post-compulsory education, it was the expectation that new settlers would find manual low-paid

employment in industry. Fourteen years on from the birth of the last child (21 March 1980) saw the birth of the author of this article – Alpesh Maisuria.

In 1984, three years after the 'race' riots, the Maisuria family decided that a trade was what second youngest son Ashish (who was a very good mathematician) needed, to avoid being corrupted by the increasing levels of drug use, alcohol consumption, and the subcultures of the 1980s. Borrowing and scraping, the Maisurias invested in a shop in the quaint Bradford village of Idle. This was a bold move to the suburbs, to an almost all white and relatively more affluent area of the city.

1990s

Continuing on from the previous decade, the 1990s were blighted with flashpoints of racism despite more than 30 years lapsing since the first Asian, Black and other minority ethnic immigrants settling on British soil.

In April 1993, Stephen Lawrence was brutally murdered by a violent gang of racist white young men who stabbed him and severed arteries that sprayed blood from his body until he died (Macpherson, 1999). The murder sent shock waves through a country that had seemingly neutralized racism and embraced tolerance through multiculturalism. In 1997, New Labour ordered an enquiry into the murder, and two years later the Macpherson Report was published with significant findings. The Metropolitan Police Force was charged with institutionalized racism, stereotyping Asian, Black and other minority ethnic people and suffering from general incompetence.

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With a huge degree of effort and application, the convenience store was trading well and Jai had found financial comfort and had taken early retirement. After the turbulence of the transitional period, it seemed that the move to Idle was a successful one. Then in 1999 came the biggest adversity to hit the Maisuria family. After an ordinary day, at 9.30 p.m., Ashish and Jai were closing the shop when three masked raiders stormed the premises shouting racist abuse. A knife was held to Jai's throat and Ashish was punched to the floor whilst the cash till and tobacco products worth thousands of pounds were stolen. The family had experienced sporadic instances of verbal racism as Idle gradually became blighted with a hard drugs problem, but had never endured any kind of physical or verbal violence to this extent. The psychological repercussions of this event were very damaging, despite support from local residents. Rather than sell the shop and move to a safer haven, the decision was made to be strong and not be moved by the racists. Vigilance and a state-of-the-art security system were the order of the day.

After finishing first school and middle school, I was accepted for admission at the local grant-maintained school. Following relatively successful General Certificate of Secondary Education grades, I finished college and took

the unprecedented step of applying to university (despite a pressuring 'not for us' attitude from my parents). This is an indication of the change in aspiration and confidence that many second generation British Indians had experienced.

2000s

The new millennium began with the tragedy of the death of Damilola Taylor. The 10-year-old black boy was stabbed to death by racist youths. Not long after the Nigerian's murder, several northern towns of Britain were the scenes of a degree of significant racial violence not seen for 20 years between the British National Party (BNP) and local residents. These were timely reminders of the importance of the Race Relations Act (RRA), which was revisited and amended in 2000 to make 'race' equality measures proactive rather than reactive. This became known as the Race Relations Amendment Act (RRAA).

A year after the RRAA (in 2001) came some of the most iconic scenes in Western history when Islamic militants flew airplanes into the World Trade Center in the USA causing large-scale devastation. With this backdrop and the hostility to asylum seekers and economic migrants in sections of the British press, the BNP enjoyed the most successful election campaign of any British far-right party. The combination of these events, fuelled by the later London bombings in 2005, was the catalyst for a discourse of Islamophobia and increased levels of racist activity. None became more high profile than the case of Anthony Walker. The teenager from Merseyside was attacked by a group of racists who left an axe embedded in his skull. These important events, which seemed to mirror those of the 1970s, were the incentive for the Government to set up the Commission for Integration and Cohesion with the chief purpose of exploring 'Britishness' and the way in which identities are formed (Commission for Racial Equality [CRE], 2005).

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In 2001 the Maisuria family were part of 129,356 people from Kenya living in Britain (BBC, 2005). But racism had diseased Bradford, and on Christmas Eve 2005 the store was robbed for the second time. Perhaps the most complex discourse to have emerged in inner cities, such as Bradford, is that of inter-race racism. Where once African-Caribbeans and Asians would stand side by side to fight the fascists from the National Front, these factions were now antagonistic towards one another, fighting for territory in working-class parts of the city suffering from abject poverty.

In considering my family's experiences and exploring 'race' policy, I have come to the conclusion that the real problem is not exclusively racism, but actually the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says that under the stewardship of New Labour 'the gains from recent economic growth are still being felt more strongly by the very richest and less strongly by the very poorest' (IFS, 2000). In order to understand why

racism prevails in today's advanced British society, and to address it, it is essential to analyse 'race' in association with social class. Until we understand and start to address this matrix of interrelations in schools, universities and training courses, we will find only short-term simple solutions to a problem that requires something far more complex.

I had endured internal and external barriers to educational achievement, but after completing a Master's degree with distinction at Goldsmiths College, University of London, I now hope to pursue a career in academia.

Notes

[1] In this article the word 'race' appears in single quotation marks for three reasons: Firstly, there is the notion that 'race' is a social construct; it does not exist in a fixed paradigm and its definition is constantly changing; Secondly, it is an all-encompassing term which is sometimes used to denote ethnicity, culture, language or something else – it has no theoretical underpinning; Thirdly, the concept of a 'race' has been used by such Victorian scientists and explorers as Francis Galton to establish and legitimize power relations in society through creating an inferior (Black) 'race' and a superior (White) 'race' (see Chitty, 2004). Since then, numerous social and physical scientific tests have disproved the theory of a biologically inferior 'race'. Gaine & George (1999, p. 5) define 'race' as 'a group of people who may share some physical characteristics to which special importance is attached'. Furthermore, Grosvenor (1999, p. 70) says, '"Races" are not naturally occurring populations', a 'race' is 'an imagined collectivity'.

[2] The nomenclature 'Asian, Black and other minority ethnic' is used rather than 'Black' as advocated by the Institute of Race Relations (www.irr.org.uk) or the more common 'black and ethnic minority' for four reasons. First, the term 'black', once popular as an all-encompassing nomenclature, had ceased to have that purchase from the late 1980s onwards: hence the need for the wider formulation. Second, with respect to this nomenclature, the omission of the word 'other' between 'and' and 'ethnic minority' implies that only 'ethnic minorities' (people of Cypriot and Irish origin, for example) are minority constituencies whereas black people are not. This is, of course, not accurate. Third, the use of the term 'ethnic minority' has, in practice, meant that members of the dominant majority group are not referred to in terms of their ethnicity, with the implication that they do not have ethnicity (the sequencing of 'minority' before 'ethnic' does not carry this implication, since the creation of a new formulation, together with the prioritising of the former over the latter, facilitates the conceptualisation of a *majority* ethnic group too). Fourth, 'black and ethnic minority' has the effect of excluding people of Asian and other origins who do not consider themselves 'black'. The fact that people of Asian origin form the majority of 'non-white' minority ethnic women and men is masked.

[3] It is often thought that multiculturalism started with the *SS Empire Windrush*, but this is a false assumption. Cultural (and religious and social) diversity is age old

with the artificial boundaries and separate (but interconnected) histories of Scotland and Wales. For a fuller discussion on this see Cole & Blair (2006).

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