British Asians have transformed public life – and long may it continue

**By Shashank Joshi (shortened and reduced)**

from 12 Apr 2014 in Daily Telegraph, the 2nd March 2015

Perhaps the best-known sketch of the seminal Nineties comedy show `Goodness Gracious Me` was one in which young Asian friends “go out for an English”. They make a fun of pronouncing the waiter’s name and dare one another to opt for “the blandest thing on the menu” (scampi). The sketch made a joke about the British ritual, the rowdy trip to the curry house. This marked a new self-confidence on the part of British Asians but also showed that those communities’ culture had entered the mainstream. Asians used to be the victims of the joke but, in the 1990s, having achieved success in so many areas of British life, they began writing their own – often in a very British tradition of self-mockery and wit.

This week, that Asian cultural assimilation reached new heights with the appointment of Sajid Javid as Culture Secretary. Javid, son of a Pakistani bus conductor, is the first Asian male to lead a government department, whose talents took him to be vice-president of Chase Manhattan bank at 25.

For, as recent figures by the Office for National Statistics show, Indians make up the largest part of the 2.9-million growth in foreign-born residents between 2001 and 2011. They share colonial ties, a common language and similar legal and education systems, the Indian-born population grew by nearly 700,000 – easily beating Ireland, as well as Poland and Pakistan. In many ways, this is just the newest chapter in an old story. The biggest leap came between 1961 and 1971, when Britain’s Indian population doubled. In 1971, the Immigration Act staunched the flow. Indian immigration slowed for 40 years until the last decade’s sudden boost.

My own family is part of these numbers. They emigrated from India in the 1980s, making their home in the suburbs of north London. My childhood was one of trips to India and the Isle of Wight. My parents spoke to me in English and Hindi. Integration was never especially hard, with my parents having grown up in India on a diet of Enid Blyton and the BBC World Service. This cultural confluence has had a lasting impact on my life. My wedding last summer was a Anglo-Indian hybrid, joining my wife’s white, English family to my own. It was a traditional service in a village church, with a short Indian ceremony later on. The guests were dressed in saris and dresses, kurtas and morning suits. Bollywood dancing was followed by samosas served alongside fish and chips. It would be absurd to think that this is the British norm – but it is getting less unusual: 8.8 per cent of British marriages are now “mixed”. Just 15 per cent of the population oppose interracial marriages today, compared with 50 per cent in the Eighties and 40 per cent in the Nineties.

True, my positive experience is conditioned by the privileges of a middle-class background and London’s multiculturalism. But it was not too long ago that my wife and I might have encountered hostility. I have also had the luxury of growing up in a Britain with an unprecedented diversity of role models. Previously, popular understanding of the Asian immigrant experience was dominated by the twin stereotypes of curry houses and corner shops. Later Indian immigrants often – like my family – arrived with more education, skills and money than their Bangladeshi and Pakistani counterparts. Those, like my parents, , invested heavily in education for their children.

Second- and third- generation Indians became associated with success in law and medicine.

Today, a quarter of Britain’s medical workforce comes from South Asia.

Asians in Britain are scaling the heights of arts and entertainment, diplomacy and journalism – careers to which earlier generations rarely had access. The prominence of Indian characters on so many British soaps is perhaps the clearest sign of cultural familiarity. Chefs like Atul Kochhar and Cyrus Todiwala have reinforced the role of Indian food in modern British cuisine. Slumdog Millionaire, a British film set in India and starring a British-Indian actor, is only the most high-profile recent example of the fusion.

Politics has reflected the trend. Between 1924 and 1987, the year Keith Vaz was elected as a Labour MP, not a single British Asian sat in Parliament. Yet the current parliament includes 18 British Asians.

Now, at a moment of rising disquiet over immigration, it is more important than ever to recognise and celebrate the enriching transformation that Asians have wrought on British life. Long may it continue. (740 words)

Tasks:

a) Describe the cultural confluence in Shashank Joshis life and the impact on it.

b) Comment on the statement: “it is more important than ever to recognise and celebrate the enriching transformation that Asians have wrought on British life.”