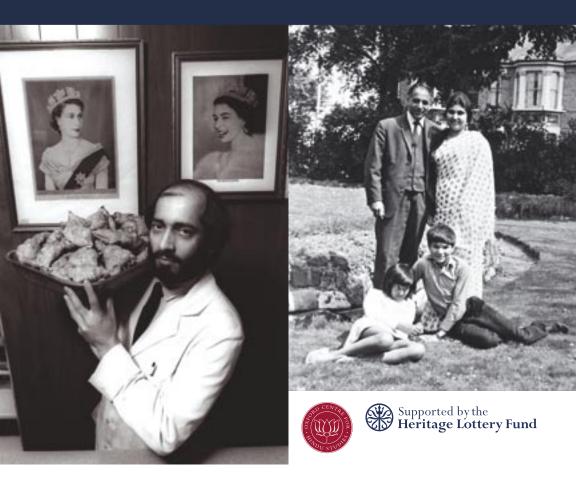


Recording the memories of first-generation Hindus in Britain



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Introduction

This touring exhibition highlights the British Hindu Oral History Project, which offers a real chance for Hindus in Britain to get to know themselves from the voices of the first-generation.

There are an estimated 559,000 Hindus in Britain (2001 census figures). The majority of these people will have hailed from Gujarat, arrived here from East Africa in the 1960s and 1970s and many are now approaching old age.

Without capturing this history of the older generation, the Hindu community in Britain will lose access to this heritage and ultimately their identity. To date this is the only national project to form a permanent record of the Hindu community's cultural heritage and British history.

The British Hinduism Oral History Project

With help from The Heritage Lottery Fund, The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies has launched this nation wide British Hindu Oral History Project. The project will form the first permanent record of the cultural and historical life of Hindus in Britain. At the completion of the project in April 2004, three hundred interviews with members of the first-generation Hindu community in Britain will have been conducted.

The transcribed interviews will be kept in the Hindu Archive at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. The archive will serve as a basis for community awareness and a valuable resource for future research, as well as media projects.

"We feel the project has huge model value for other communities. There's no denying the strategic and important vision behind the Oral History Project and the work of the Centre."

Helen Jackson, Heritage Lottery Fund







Hindu migration to Britian

Hindu settlement in Britain began as a result of the British colonial relationship with India and Africa. The majority of Hindus, as British passport holders, arrived in Britain from East Africa in the 1960s and early 1970s following the impact of building newly independent states.



Map showing Hindu migrattion to Britain

In 1964 it was a little bit of adventure and a little bit of inquisitiveness. Some of my friends made an application to the High Commision and got the employment voucher. In 1963 the British passed legislation to stop, then only those with work permits could go, there was a rush, I made an application and was granted that. Then it was 3 months within which we had to decide...it was a week left whether to go or not to go. I thought I'll go and see. I left my wife and daughter and when I was disappointed I wanted to return. My wife said, be there for 6 months, then we will decide. She joined me...and said we will see another year or so, it went on like that.

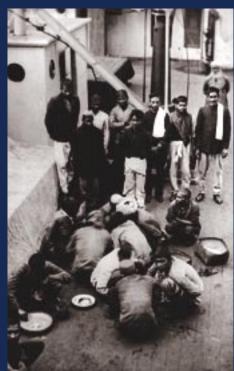
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Yes, that's a good question really — why? Well, at that time, as I mentioned to you, there was some racial tension going on in Guyana. At that time, 1964–65, it had escalated — it had gone really bad and people were being murdered and it was Blacks versus Indians and so on in those days. We had our British passports, you see and so we decided, look here, this place, I mean, is getting rather rough. So let's see if we could go back to London, having uprooted everything...we bought our own house here.

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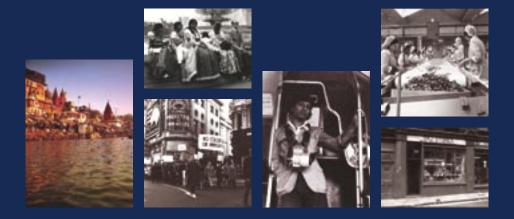
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I was introduced to this family in Ranchi...and my wife was the eldest daughter in the family...and then she came to this country as a student of her own accord...so we kept in touch and decided to get married. So I came after her, she sponsored me.



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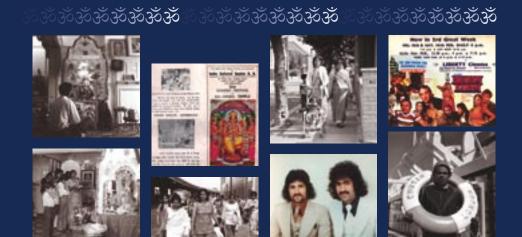
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What were their experiences of arriving & settling in Britain?

What was it like in their country of origin?

66	There weren't mandirs (temples) in Nairobi at that time, but there were mandirs in the house, and some people had big mandirs in the house and everybody could go.	"		We had a room, there was a huge double bed, and I remember all of us sleeping in this bed. A bit like East is East. There were three or four or five of us stuck in this huge bed, so we'd have three across one side and on the opposite side we'd have a couple.	
66	When I grew up in MalaysiaI went to Sunday school. We lived opposite a Christian church. We had Christmas carols in the house. I was brought up in a very good atmosphere to respect other religions.	"	66	I was travelling on my own and had never seen a plane before. I did not think anything of it. I checked in and my grandmother was waiting outside and I never turned around. I was just excited I suppose.	,,
	There was this kind of to-ing and fro-ing between Hindu and Muslim and Sikh communities at a level that is unprecedented I suppose and would be unbelievable in these times.		"	There were a lot of cases of people who were suffering, but they were suffering more because they didn't know English.	,,
	Mathhur – it's today known as a Sanskrit village where many many people are capable of communicating with each other through the medium of Sanskrit.			The first few years, it was subdued, because there was always a feeling, that look "we're immigrants here, let us behave, let us not expose ourselves too much about things". Our religion, our religious activities were always kept within ourselves.	
	I was born in Tanzania. I was there until 1966. The place where I was born was still under colonial rule, the old system works, everything was great.		66	I landed at Victoria Station because I came by sea and then I went to Southall gurudwara because I had no money, I only had fourteen shillings in my pocket.	,,
66	Jinjha, East Africa. I remember a lovely little town. I used to going for a walk every night with my father. I remember every Saturday night and Sunday going		"	It was a culture shock for me to see a lady smoking.	,,
	to the Swaminarayan temple mainly because the food was very good. I suppose my main recollection of Africa was loads of space, there was no TV there until I was 10.	"	66	I still remember every Sunday the van coming to our house in Hounslow and everybody standing there waiting with their orders in hand it was a great convenience. But when we went north there were no shops selling Indian food in Wigan.	"



Was it difficult practising Hinduism in Britain?



I got my driving license and I was the only driver. So literally I used to pick up everyone -15 or 20 people and then drop them back and take them for Navarati.

So when I came to this country I stayed with my uncle and aunt they always had an altar so I shared the altar. When I lived on my own I gave God a separate shelf.

66

Yes compared to our small village in Kutch, Gujarat, practising the Swaminarayan way of life was understandably difficult. We use to get together at a devotees house for bhajans and puja.

No its not how I kept the faith its how the faith kept me. Because of Baba coming into my life because of my devotion to him and because of me seeing how he had helped me in my life I was getting more confident that he's protecting me and because he's protecting me I need to do something in return for him, I need to do something for the community. Its not as though I was praying, even now I don't pray everyday, my wife does...so I was more of spiritual person – I wanted to help people wherever I can.

I can't recall in 1965 any mandirs. But we, the West Indian community, used to hire halls and go and do our thing.

Where do you see as home now?



Aum away from Home

Recording the memories of first-generation Hindus in Britain

To listen to the stories

just pick-up the phone identity expectations history belonging family journeys roots experiences adventure children generations memories...

How to contact and take part

The British Hindu Oral History Project is designed in such a way that everyone can get involved. If you feel that you would like to be part of this exciting project and a part of history making please contact us. You could put your name forward as volunteer to conduct interviews of family and friends. Or you may wish us to come and interview you.

For more information contact:

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