

# **Boundary lines and Belonging: Growing up Hindu-Punjabi in Multicultural London**

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The question of identity is always an interesting one. There is the identity you form for yourself, and the one that others form for you. They are often not one and the same. Moreover, it becomes an evolving definition.

This has certainly been the case for me. Culturally, I identify as Punjabi, and religiously as Hindu. I was born and raised in Greenford, Middlesex, and now reside in Pinner, Greater London. Middlesex no longer exists, apparently! Strange as it may seem, my parents are Kenyan-born and my dad has never set foot in India, but my sense of belonging is tied as much to India as it is to Britain.

My family is not deeply religious, so my first sense of identity comes from being Punjabi. The many regions of India mean that there are disparities and differences, and Punjab is known for its farming, its vibrancy, its resilience, and as the region that got torn in two when the British finally departed India. The remembrance of it was painful to those that lived through it, and it was never something that was openly discussed at home. It was the only thing I learnt about Punjab that came from external rather than internal sources.

Even though this piece is about my faith identity, it would not be fair or honest to skip over the importance of cultural heritage and how much it has shaped me and others. We feel freer to acknowledge and celebrate ourselves more than we have done before; to speak our languages and enjoy our foods. Most people I know who are like me love being British. I definitely prefer portraying myself as British rather than English. I am a very proud Londoner (and fully accept how privileged London is, comparatively), but for some reason the term Englishness feels closed. Britishness feels more open – a unity of nations; everyone enjoying their own quirks and comforts. In the same breath, I can also tell you that many English-born migrants who trace their roots to countries such as India do not support England in the cricket. In other sports, they might well, but the cricket reminds us of Empire. It sticks in the throat. There are sensitivities at play here, and they must be acknowledged. Ours is a complex relationship.

My cultural identity is strong and provides me with a worldview. My faith provides me with a different one. Sometimes they complement, and at other times the two identities feel more contrasting.

I arrived at my faith quite late in life. This feels like a blessing, as it meant that the journey into it was very much my own. No one shepherded me that wasn't welcome to do so. I am still learning and centring myself within my faith. Unlike my cultural identity, my faith identity doesn't feel as natural. It's more hesitant and exploratory at times.

Interestingly, the practice of Hinduism is about the dissolution of identity, rather than the formation of it. It is about surrendering your Ego (your 'I' association) so that you can merge with divinity. Everyone who practises Hinduism will follow their own path, but my own spiritual path is one of knowledge and selfless service. I have countless books on Hindu philosophy and attend a regular class; there is still much learning to be done. In terms of selfless service, this is always about serving the greater good without fear or favour. It has translated as taking in people's shoes at my place of worship in preparation for a religious service, and has also meant taking part in interfaith dialogue at the Vatican with Hindu and Christian faith leaders from across Europe.

Hinduism is essentially a spiritual faith, but the influence of Indian politics on the practice of Hinduism in Britain cannot be ignored. The riots in Leicester in 2022 bore witness to rising tensions between Muslims and Hindus – mostly instigated by young men with ties to Pakistan and India. Kashmir comes up increasingly in conversation between South Asians from India, with terms such as Hindutva and Islamism being bandied around; conflating territorial disputes with faith-based ideologies is an injudicious exercise.

As a British-born, second-generation Indian, I dislike the fact that the reach of Indian and Pakistani politics is so great; I feel there are other matters worthy of my time and attention, which are closer to home. Immediate questions in my own mind at the moment include ensuring better provisions for religious studies GCSE so that Dharmic-faith teaching is adequately supported, which is currently not the case,<sup>1</sup> and creating a framework to help Hindu places of worship and community halls comply with Martyn's Law.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, some Hindus share a similar perspective, but others are more radical about exercising what they see as the protection of their Hindu rights. This group is growing in number and voice. They cannot be ignored. Assumptions about who we are and what we stand for are dangerous; nuances need to be understood, and this takes concerted time and energy. Governments, both past and present, need to do better at unpacking our communal and individual relationships with place, culture and faith. How do Hindus who arrived from East-Africa, differ in their relationship to India with those who emigrated directly from India? How do 80-year-old Hindus feel about British identity, compared to 20-year-olds? How integrated are Hindu Gujaratis compared to Hindu Tamils? What is known of those who trace their lineage back to the Caribbean or to Nepal? What policies matter to Hindus? These questions and more need to be asked and answered.

We are at our best when we are celebratory and basking in what we have achieved, in spite of it all. We have come such a long way, and creating a false narrative of victimhood does not sit comfortably or serve us well. We are not victims. We have strength and power, and we're beginning to exercise it. Irrespective of your political leanings, how could any Hindu not be proud of Rishi Sunak? A British-born, Hindu Prime Minister. He may end up being the last, but he was also the first. He made it. We made it. We contribute to the welfare and flourishing

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<sup>1</sup> Insight UK (2021), A report on the state of Hinduism in religious education in UK schools, ISBN: 978-1-5272-8403-6.

<sup>2</sup> <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2025/04/03/martyns-law-factsheet/>

of Britain in significant ways.<sup>3</sup> We are enterprising, innovative, hardworking, and driven by a desire to succeed.<sup>4</sup> That becomes a double-edged sword when our concerns translate as minor compared to those of other faith communities. They are not minor – they are different. I, for one, do not feel the need for equality from the great and good. But at the very least we deserve and expect equity.

I am less sure than I have been in recent times that we are adequately served in this respect. If certain reports are to be believed, the last time HRH The Prince of Wales (Prince William) entered a Hindu Mandir was in 2016, and he was in India at the time – you can't miss. Such a development is considerably more troubling than it is disappointing. Additionally, not every Hindu place of worship had the finance available to ensure robust security measures, and yet the fight goes on for funding to protect some of our most vulnerable Hindu Mandirs. Perhaps this helps explain why we have seen next to nothing of HRH The Prince of Wales in nearly 10 years! Conversely, the Office of the Mayor of London was among the first to reach out to the Hindu community in a meaningful and respectful way following the recent Air India plane crash. For us, there have been some wins and some losses. But we do not sit under a cloak of invisibility. My fear is that if calls from more nuanced and measured voices like my own for equity go unheeded, calls for equality from the more militant Hindu voices will become stronger and louder.

As an end note, I'm happy to relate my celebratory summer of sports in 2025. I was absolutely ecstatic when the Lionesses were crowned European Champions again. A drawn test series between India and England cost me £50 but was the fairest and most fitting of conclusions.

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<sup>3</sup> Grant Thornton UK LLP & Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI). (2020). *India in the UK: The Diaspora Effect*. Grant Thornton UK LLP.

<sup>4</sup> Chaudhry, S., & Crick, D. (2010). A case history of a successful Hindu entrepreneur in the United Kingdom. In L.-P. Dana (Ed.), *Entrepreneurship and Religion* (pp. 386–398). Edward Elgar Publishing.