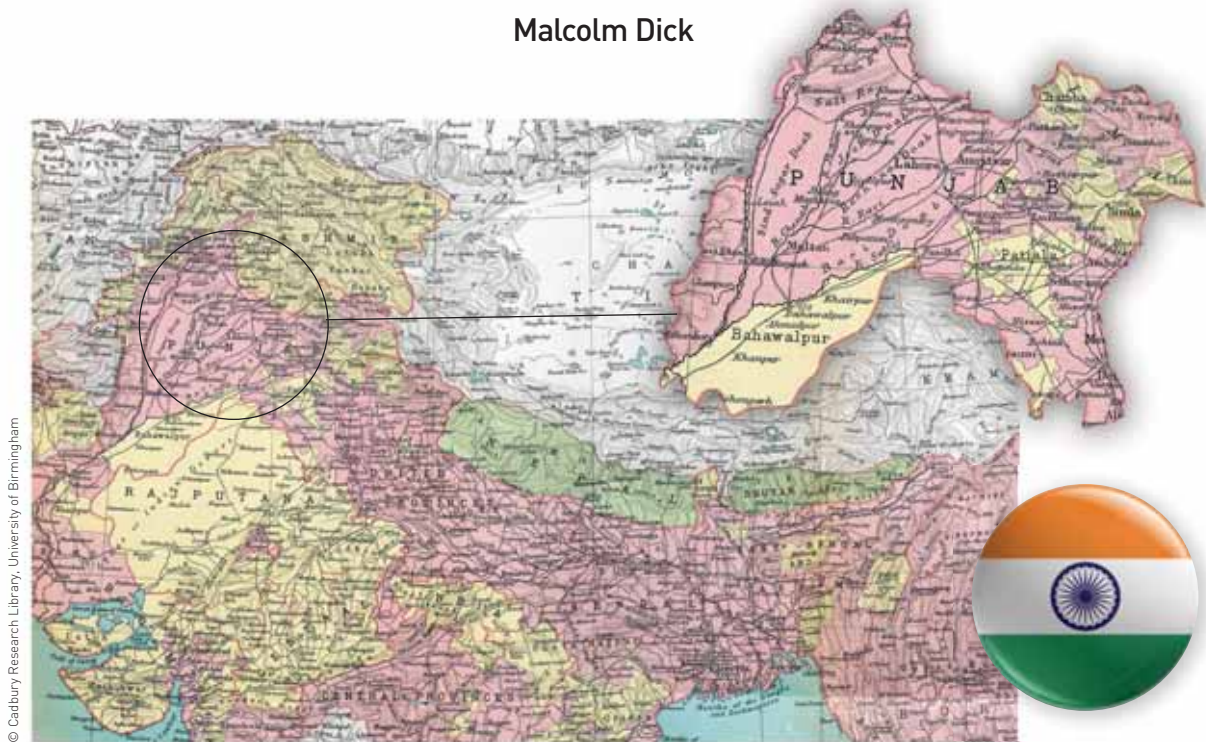


INDIAN EXPERIENCES

Malcolm Dick



The Indian Empire, economic from The Imperial Gazetteer of India, volume 3, 1907.

“When we went out into the playground we all rushed round this new pupil because he was wearing a turban and we all crowded round him. He was absolutely terrified and he backed up against the wall and his eyes were just about like organ stops....We were touching his turban and his face and his clothing, because in those days, we had never seen a coloured person.....”

This recollection humanises the experience of migration, for the migrant and the observer. It is from an oral history in Birmingham Archives and Heritage of Joan Lloyd’s experiences and captures a moment in 1936 when she was a pupil at St George’s School, Edgbaston. The boy’s father, almost certainly a Sikh, was a doctor, who came to practice in Birmingham before the war.

An Indian presence in Birmingham, however, was not new. In 1869, Joseph Salter, a Christian missionary, toured Britain ‘in search of the wandering Asiatic’ and found three lodging-houses for Indians. We know little about these men or how long they stayed, but almost certainly they were working in Birmingham’s industries.

This account refers to a small number of individuals; larger numbers had to wait until migration increased after 1945. Many newcomers were Sikhs from the Punjab and others were Hindus, Muslims, Christians or Parsees. Several had served in Britain’s Indian Army or had worked for the Raj. By 1991, people of Indian origin in Birmingham totalled 51,075, but there were also Indians in the Black Country, Coventry and Worcester.

The first migrants were employed as unskilled or semi-skilled workers in manufacturing, despite being highly qualified in many cases. Men frequently obtained work through the recommendation of a fellow national who spoke the same language and was already employed in a particular firm. Others worked on the buses when the colour bar on employment was lifted in the 1950s. In Birmingham, most settled in inner-city areas such as Aston, Handsworth and Small Heath, where single men and families could live in cheap privately-rented or owner-occupied property, close to places of work.

By the late twentieth century, people of Indian origin entered the middle classes, running shops or firms such as East End Foods or working in the professions and local government. Many moved out of the inner city and settled in suburbs such as Edgbaston, Harborne and Great Barr.

Indians have made a mark on the landscape, through their religious buildings including the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha Sikh Temple on Soho Road, Birmingham and the Sri Venkateswara Balaji Hindu Temple in Tividale, Sandwell. Festivals such as Diwali and Vaisakhi are widely celebrated, Bollywood films are shown in cinemas and Bhangra music has become a point of cultural identity for young people. ●

Further Reading

Ian Grosvenor, Rita McLean and Siân Roberts (eds), *Making Connections: Birmingham Black International History* (Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures, 2002).

Dhani Prem, *The Parliamentary Leper* (Metric Publications, 1965).