

# Public service media and race relations in postcolonial Britain: BBC and immigrant programming, 1965–1988

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## Abstract

This article explores how British Asians negotiated the politics of race in the formative years of British broadcasting from the 1960s to the 1980s. Marked by significant changes within the BBC and British society at large, this period saw the first institutional initiatives oriented towards Caribbean and Asian communities. Drawing on primary research materials from the BBC Written Archives, we analyse the Immigrant Programmes Unit and the Immigrant Programme Advisory Committees as sites where ideas of race, ethnicity and citizenship were continually debated and worked out. We argue that the BBC functioned as a profoundly asymmetrical contact zone in which British Asians' efforts to counter assimilationist ideas and programmes were stymied by senior managers working with deeply ingrained ideas of cultural, ethnic and racial differences. Immigrants would be accommodated, but in ways that would not challenge the viewing habits of the majority or imagine solidarities across racial, ethnic and national lines.

## Keywords

BBC, media history, postcolonial studies, South Asian Diaspora, television studies, UK

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## The BBC seeks a chairman

In a confidential letter dated 16 August 1965 and addressed to O. J. Whitley in the Director-General's office, the BBC's Controller of Midlands Production, Patrick Beech, weighed in on an issue that had become a major concern for the venerable broadcasting institution. Discussing the composition of a newly constituted Immigrant Programmes Advisory Committee (IPAC), Beech made an intriguing proposal:

'I don't think it would appear well to have a white face in the Chair: at the same time, I am not very happy about any of the Indians or Pakistanis we have in mind. What I should like to do would be to have Stuart Hall, if he would serve: the emphasis being on his capacity as a University Sociologist' (BBC, 1965c: 1).

At the time, Stuart Hall was a Research Fellow at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the city of Birmingham and served as the Chairman of the BBC's Regional Advisory Council representing the Midlands. Pointing out that he was familiar with Hall's work and had 'very high regard for him', Beech also noted that Whitley likely knew Hall 'as Hoggart's right-hand man' (BBC, 1965c:1). An academic luminary, Richard Hoggart had been an influential member of the Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting (1960–1962) that set the agenda for the expansion of the BBC's television network and programming.

However, Beech's endorsement and appeal to regard Hall as a 'University Sociologist' were summarily dismissed by Philip Mason, a former civil servant in colonial India and Chairman of the Institute of Race Relations. As the minutes from a meeting held on August 23, 1965, note:

'Doubts about the suitability of Mr. Stuart Hall had been expressed outside the BBC. It has been suggested, for example, that he was too young, had no particular interest in immigrants' programmes, and in any case, that it would not be appropriate to have a West Indian as chairman of a committee which would deal with programmes for Indians and Pakistanis' (BBC, 1965d: 13).

Mason had expressed this view in a brief but strongly worded letter to O. J. Whitley (19 August 1965). By October 1965, the BBC announced the names of the members of IPAC with Philip Mason assuming the role of the Chairman.

## Public television, race and citizenship

We open with this story from the BBC archives not only because it involves key figures in public broadcasting, the government and academia. More broadly, the discussion reveals how questions regarding immigration, race relations and citizenship came to define the BBC and more broadly, the very foundations of public service broadcasting during the 1960s and 1970s. It had become increasingly difficult to assume that the 'public' in public service was an unmarked, white citizen. With the establishment of the Immigrant Programmes Advisory Committee to monitor minority programming, the

BBC had taken on the challenge of providing a cultural space for the representation of British Asian and British Caribbean communities while also fulfilling the state's mandate of 'integrating' immigrant communities into British society.

By the late 1950s, race riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham had made it clear that British media institutions would have to contend with the country's transition into a post-imperial and multi-racial society and with it, a new politics of representation. Televised representations of Windrush migrants, initially framed as 'citizens of the Empire returning to the motherland', had given way to a new frame that positioned them as 'Our Jamaican problem' (Newton, 2011: 3). And with the gradual consolidation of Independent Television (ITV) 'that challenged the discourses of British Broadcasting' and the launch of BBC 2, a new direction emerged under Director-General Hugh Greene that opened up, as Newton (2011: 110) notes, new 'possibilities for a liberalist platform for television programmes on [. . .] race relations'. It is in this context that the BBC organised two 'immigrant conferences' in 1965 inviting Caribbean and Asian representatives to articulate their demands and expectations. These conferences resulted in the formation of the Immigrant Programmes Unit (IPU) and the Immigrant Programmes Advisory Committee (IPAC).

In pathbreaking work, scholars including Malik (2001), Newton (2011) and Schaffer (2014) have analysed television's role in mediating race and ethnicity, revealing how race gets articulated either in cultural terms (language, ethnicity, religious practice) or skin colour. Their work also reveals how British Asians and Caribbeans pushed back against the BBC's hollow adherence to Reithian ideals, a position that often allowed the broadcaster to serve as a platform where anti-immigrant sentiments and outright racism were expressed. Further, the quick dismissal of Stuart Hall for the chairmanship of the committee also reveals the role of British institutions like the BBC in mobilising differences between Asian and Caribbean communities. As we will show in the analysis that follows, senior management in the BBC routinely invoked deeply ingrained ideas about cultural, ethnic and racial differences to maintain a highly segmented broadcasting regime. Far from creating opportunities to reflect on life in multi-racial Britain, BBC personnel actively resisted attempts by members of the IPAC and IPU to make room for a political vision of 'Blackness' that emphasised cross-racial solidarities.

In conversation with scholarship on how managerial logics and production cultures shape the politics of representation in the media and cultural industries (Dasgupta and Imre, 2021; Schlesinger, 2014; Saha, 2018), we analyse the IPAC and the IPU (1965–1988) as critical sites where ideas of race, ethnicity and citizenship were continually debated and worked out. We argue that the BBC functioned as a profoundly asymmetrical contact zone in which British Asians from a range of socio-cultural and political backgrounds pushed back against logics of representation that insisted on Asian and Caribbean 'integration' and 'assimilation' while also raising questions about the structuring whiteness that lay at the heart of the BBC's imaginary of the 'public'. But as it turned out, these committees and units had limited power to challenge established production structures. Working within a carefully mandated 'ethnic broadcasting' arena, they could do little to shift the BBC's imagination of its majority audiences as white, and locating those 'not white' on the periphery of television culture. The IPAC and IPU became part of a broader structure of 'racial governance' that ensured that any radical potential would

be shunted onto a track of 'reified, absolute difference' (Saha, 2018: 59). Asian and Caribbean immigrants would be accommodated, but in ways that would not challenge the viewing habits of the majority or, for that matter, imagine solidarities across racial, ethnic and national lines.

## Re-imagining broadcasting for a postcolonial Britain

The early 1960s marked a turning point for the BBC on multiple fronts, but none more critical than meeting the UK government's call for broadcasting to address the issue of 'integrating' immigrant communities into British society. In fact, this call for centering questions of migration and citizenship was part of a broader emphasis on broadcasting's role in public life. Influential reports authored by the Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting (1962) and the Commonwealth Immigrants Advisory Council (led by Philip Mason) stressed that remaining oriented towards public service was crucial and that the BBC should play a major role in addressing issues pertaining to immigration (Newton 2011). It was against this backdrop that a series of articles published in *The Guardian* newspaper on 'integrating Britain's immigrants' sparked a correspondence between the BBC and the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) on producing a weekly programme for the English language education of Indian and Pakistani immigrants (BBC, 1965a). Working closely with government officials, the BBC's Director-General Hugh Greene soon announced two conferences with representatives from Indian, Pakistani and Caribbean communities to discuss the possibility of producing radio and television programmes.

In the very first conference held on July 6 1965, issues of linguistic and religious diversity within the Asian community served to set them up in opposition to both native white and Caribbean communities. Talks thus focussed on the subsequent need for specialised programming for English language education and the wider integration of Asian communities into British ways of life (BBC, 1977: 2). These ideas were immediately challenged by Indian and Pakistani representatives who argued in favour of programming that would educate both recently arrived immigrants and established British viewers and listeners. As Hansa Mehta, wife of Dr Jivraj Narayan Mehta, the High Commissioner for India, put it, if the BBC wanted 'to do away with colour prejudice, the people here also have to be educated' (BBC, 1965b: 4–5). Dr Prem, Vice-Chairman of the Commonwealth Welfare Council for the West Midlands, agreed with Ms Mehta: 'if you give lessons in English to the immigrants, [ . . . ] you should also give lessons in Hindustani to those who are concerned with the welfare of the immigrant people' (BBC, 1965b: 9). Mehta and Prem's arguments did receive some support from W. B. Tudhope from the Department of Education and Science. Tudhope recognised that 'relations between immigrants and native-born population were, of course, the business of race' and went on to make a case for programmes that could facilitate two-way cross-cultural interactions and education (BBC, 1965b: 34–35). But with these exceptions, the discussion deployed language and religion as proxy frameworks that helped to avoid confronting the problems facing immigrant communities in terms of colonial history and structural racism. The main outcomes of this first conference were decisions on the development of a magazine-style television format with a balanced mix of entertainment and

educational content, and the constitution of an advisory body to guide the BBC's Immigrant Programmes Unit on the evolving needs, demands and feedback from the community (BBC, 1965b: 31).

In marked contrast, discussions in the conference devoted to the Caribbean community held a week later centred not on language, regional background, or religion but rather, on skin colour. Representatives in that meeting articulated the need for programming that could contextualise and normalise the presence of Caribbean immigrants in Britain and the need to alleviate prejudices and stereotypes, particularly around issues concerning women, housing, health, and childcare. Hugh Greene summed up these strikingly different approaches to 'integrating' Asian and Caribbean communities:

'At this conference we are becoming aware of a dilemma which did not exist last week when we had Pakistanis and Indians here: that is, the problem of integration. [. . .] The idea which has come up here - that they are English children of another colour - did not come up with the Indians and Pakistanis; so to that extent there is a dilemma' (BBC, 1965b: 21).

Unlike the Asian committee members, the Caribbean representatives were not in favour of special programming. Gerry Hynes, the BBC's Immigrants Programmes Officer, in a review in 1970, noted that 'by and large, the West Indians regard themselves as more British, more patriotic towards the mother country and her Queen: more Christian, better cricket players—in fact, plus anglais que les anglaise' (BBC, 1970: 19). The conference, as Hynes summarised it, rejected the idea of a 'ghetto programme for ghetto dwellers' (BBC, 1970: 19). Rather, the focus for the Caribbean community, as Hugh Greene outlined it after the conferences, emerged in 'the integration of our programmes' and how the BBC 'should be thinking of programmes which take account of the fact that white and coloured people are living in a mixed community and will be listening and watching those programmes together, rather than disintegrating by addressing the West Indian community in special programmes' (Greene, BBC, 1965b: 35). These sharp differences in imagining Asian and Caribbean communities and their representational desires were perhaps to be expected. Discussions at these two conferences were in line with colonial orderings and 'racial divisions of labour – continued more from Britain's colonial past than inaugurated in post-war Britain – that kept Asian and Afro-Caribbean workers apart' (Sivanandan, 1981: 113).

These and other differences that emerged during the conferences led to the formation of a specialised programming unit and an advisory committee for Indian and Pakistani communities (Shields, 2016). The IPU provided the BBC with programme material and was seen to offer regional rather than production expertise (BBC, 1977: 7, 20). Members included representatives from the Commission of Racial Equality (CRE), the BBC's local radio stations, the Embassy of Pakistan and the High Commissions of India and, following its emergence as an independent nation-state in 1971, from the Bangladeshi High Commission. These members were observers rather than experts on broadcasting (BBC, 1977: 5). In terms of production, the IPU initially comprised one organiser, two production assistants (one Indian and one Pakistani), and a secretary (BBC, 1977: 7). For the IPAC, the BBC was committed to a balance between female and male as well as Indian and Pakistani members with one position earmarked for a Sikh person.

Furthermore, a regional balance was desired with seven representatives residing in the midlands, five in London, and three in the north. Gender, national, regional, and religious concerns aside, the BBC was also greatly concerned with the ideological make-up of these committees giving explicit directives to avoid appointing members from too far on the political left (BBC, 1965c: 1). As one white English programme advisor put it: 'Not least among our jobs seems to be to keep an ear cocked for political overtones, and to protect rival groups from each other' (BBC, 1975: 7).

The composition of these units and committees, in other words, was an ideological and political task with the primary goal of managing demands for changing Britain's televisual space. From its first meeting on 10th November 1965, the IPAC met regularly at the BBC's Broadcasting House in Birmingham and its members were invited to support the BBC in the implementation of government-defined imperatives to address race relations. This mandate was defined along two axes: 'Communication' and 'social problems'. 'Communication' was worked out through the development of English language literacy programmes, while 'social problems' were addressed through programmes that would help immigrants fit 'in with a new and alien society' (BBC, 1977: 10). These programmes were expected to bring about 'integration' and not 'assimilation'. As the BBC made clear: 'We have not tried to make Indians and Pakistanis abandon their customs and traditions so as to become as quickly as possible brown Englishmen' (BBC, 1973: 4).

Even as the BBC marked clearly segregated spaces for addressing Asian and Caribbean communities it would prove harder to keep the programming units and advisory committees static. From 1965 to 1988, the units' names, agendas, and compositions changed in multiple ways: the admission of social and community workers, the involvement of British-born Asians beginning in 1979 and the appointment of the first British Asian chairman, Lord Chitnis of Ryedale, the former Pratap Chitnis (BBC, 1981a: 1, 8). After multiple attempts spanning nearly a decade, the Units achieved another major victory in rejecting the term 'immigrant' and re-naming the units as the Asian Programmes Advisory Committee (APAC) and Asian Programmes Unit (APU) in 1974 (BBC, 1977: 10). Demands for renaming the Units had been raised as early as 1967 and had grown stronger with each subsequent meeting. In 1968, Dr Prem stressed that elsewhere the phrase 'Community Relations' was being adopted instead of 'Immigrant', pointing to a broader change in public conversations surrounding race and ethnicity (BBC, 1968: 4). These discussions regained urgency following the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, leading to demands for a Unit that would actually be representative of Pakistanis, Indians, and Bangladeshis. Committee members also made valiant attempts to articulate Asian and Caribbean life in terms of a shared struggle against the structuring whiteness of the BBC. As we detail in the next section, the Units and their members did set their own agendas in efforts to push the BBC out of its comfort zone when it came to re-thinking programming, production, and scheduling decisions.

## Negotiating Asianness

In negotiating and formulating demands for the needs and representations of Asians living in the UK, the IPU and the IPAC had to figure out a middle ground between the BBC on the one hand and changing discourses of race and ethnicity in British society at large.

Members of the units continually criticised the BBC for its depiction of people of Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani origin (BBC, 1977: 5), debated the use of reductive terminologies used to refer to their communities as well as the content that contributed to sparking racism in British society. One of their primary complaints was that the BBC tended to consult them after the fact instead of involving them at an early stage of the production process (BBC, 1981a: 6). By the late 1960s, recognising the limited power they had, members of the IPAC even began voicing concerns about the BBC's general programming and its negative impact on the perception of Asians in mainstream Britain – an arena that was clearly outside the remit of the specialised unit. During a meeting held in 1969, the IPAC decided to focus on a social documentary series entitled *One Pair of Eyes* (BBC 2, 1968) and, in particular, *One Black Englishman* in which the British Indian writer and poet Dom Moraes reflected on his life as an immigrant and how his perspective shifted following Enoch Powell's 1968 infamous speech that framed immigration as a threat to British national culture and identity. The response from Rafia Qureshi, a member based in Bradford, was a telling indication of how the intersection of class and race played out. Suggesting that the programme's producers seemed out of touch with the realities of immigrant life, Qureshi's response centred on stereotypical portrayals of working-class Asian communities:

'The community wanted to see the more educated people with good family backgrounds rather than the lower side [. . .] No immigrant home in Bradford was as bad as the one shown in the film' (BBC, 1969a: 3).

Qureshi's response was not an isolated one, with other members of the committee offering comments that also betrayed the anxieties that 'model' immigrants contended with and that neatly fit into discourses of uplift and integration. For instance, Mr Qayyum, a member from the High Commission of Pakistan, went on to argue that the show rendered the entire immigrant community as 'hostile, irreconcilable creatures living under subnormal conditions who should not have been here to begin with' and were 'now a permanent problem for the host country' (BBC, 1969a: 4). In response to such efforts by the IPAC to raise questions about the BBC's approach to television programming that focused on race and ethnicity, the chairman Philip Mason mobilised a well-worn trope of neutrality:

'It would be misleading if only professional people, or those in high positions were shown, leading to the British community feeling complacent about the problem, and thus they should be shown the other side - which of course, had resulted in the effect that this programme had' (BBC, 1969a: 4).

While agreeing to take such feedback seriously for future programming, the BBC continued to frame the presence of the immigrant community as a 'problem' that needed to be resolved. In 1977, Dr Sayeed, a member of the Community Relations Commission and Vice-Chairman of the Standing Conference of Asian Organisations in the UK, argued in a memo that a multi-racial society needed representations of Asian communities as a 'normal part of society' (BBC, 1977: 2), in contrast to prevailing depictions of Asians as



'problems' (BBC, 1977: 22), always 'sitting on the floor' (BBC, 1978a) and in ways that on the whole distorted the truth about how migrants were invited to the UK (BBC, 1981a: 8–9). Throughout the 1970s, the Units reiterated that an insufficient command of the English language among the Asian communities was not the primary problem and that in fact, it was that particular trope that played 'into the hands of racialists' (BBC, 1980: 2).

Even though various members of these advisory committees raised concerns about BBC programmes referring to immigrants as 'unwanted Black persons' (BBC, 1987a: 5) and using the terms 'Black' and 'Brown' in pejorative ways (BBC, 1981b: 2), it was not until 1987 that the BBC sought advice on the appropriate use of the term 'Black'. By this time, the composition of the committee had also changed and thus elicited a more radical interpretation of what Blackness could mean. Unit members Shyama Perera and Rita Patel responded that Blackness was a 'useful political term' in mobilising Caribbean and Asian communities against shared disadvantages and to unite against racism in Britain. This was a response that was certainly a function of a broader political shift, one in which activists and cultural producers were deploying a strategic cross-racial and ethnic Black alliance against white supremacy and, at the same time, the pieties of multiculturalism (Hall, 1991: 55). But it soon became clear to members of these Units that when the BBC used the term Black, it did so to further mark differences between groups. Taking a different approach, the Units then demanded that the BBC should avoid such terminology altogether and refer to 'countries of origin'. Such debates around labels and identification simmered all the way through until the Units were disbanded, and it proved difficult to arrive at a consensus on preferred terminology. These internal differences aside, the one thing everyone agreed on, though, was that the BBC had to understand that Asians and Caribbeans were 'citizens first' (BBC, 1977: 4, 1981a: 8).

Amidst the tightening of immigration laws through the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Units pushed the BBC to actively address and respond to the wider anti-immigrant political discourse that was burgeoning in the UK. Following Conservative MP Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968, Mr Rasul, a Community Relations Officer in Sheffield and member of the Unit, noted how 'the publicity given to the recent Conservative Party Conference on their immigration policy had greatly disturbed the community' and enquired how the Units could respond to balance it in the present political situation (BBC, 1969b: 2). However, other representatives like Dipak Nandy, one of the founders of the Runnymede Trust, and Mr Darashah, Counsellor of the Indian High commission, felt that it was not for the Units to impress upon the immigrant communities that their future was not grim, when it indeed was (BBC, 1969b: 2). In response to these demands, BBC's immigrants programmes organiser, Mr Hynes, rearticulated the role of the BBC:

'The BBC can only report. In terms of allaying the fears of the audience we do try to do this if they can be shown to be ill-founded. We try to point out that a speech by Enoch Powell doesn't mean to say that what he proposes is going to happen, but on the other hand indeed it might, and we have no crystal ball to forecast this' (BBC, 1969b: 6).

This insistence on neutrality served to cement the BBC's unwillingness to develop a clear editorial position on racism in British society. This particular discussion was resolved with the Chairman suggesting that the BBC invite MP Quintin Hogg to appear



on the programme to explain the Conservative Policy to the Asian audience. Anything beyond this was deemed outside the Units' scope. While often stymied by limited resources and little say over the BBC's general programming, through the decades, the Units' discussions reveal a sharp awareness of how race was being mobilised in mainstream politics in Britain. They seldom failed to call out the many instances of outspoken but also more subtle racism in the work of the BBC as well as the patronising tone in immigrant programming (BBC, 1972: 2). The Units' ability to locate the BBC as part of a broader set of British institutions whose policies shored up racism became especially clear during the 1970s when the deaths of anti-racist activists, including Gurdip Singh Chaggar, Blair Peach, Altab Ali, Ishaque Ali and Michael Ferreira (Sivanandan, 1981), exposed the police as being complicit in racist violence. Against this backdrop, Rashida Noormohamed, a Tanzanian British religious educator and community relations councillor from Birmingham, raised the issue of how the police were allowed to purchase advertising space and time in the Asian programme schedule when the entire police infrastructure was being accused of brutal racism (BBC, 1979a: 9). Members of the Unit expressed their deep sense of frustration at the BBC's insistence on staying calm and pleasant in the face of such difficult incidents.

Conflicts around race and representation were especially fraught when it came to gender, with British Asian women's portrayals becoming a charged symbolic arena. Members from the IPU often weighed in on BBC productions. For instance, Annu Gupta from *Gharbar* (Household, BBC 1977–1987) brought up the depiction of a helpless Asian woman in a BBC documentary (*Are You A Racist?*, BBC 2, 1986), asking if Asian women 'had no other defences against racist attitudes.' But members of the Units also turned their gaze inwards, often scrutinising their own productions and taking issue with patronising depictions of Asian women in influential programmes such as *Parosi* (Neighbour, BBC 2, 1979) and *Gharbar* (Household).

Khalid Hasan of the Pakistani Embassy and Mahendra Kaul, a producer in the APU, complained that Asian women are depicted as 'naive' and only served to give 'ammunition to racialists' (BBC, 1976b: 3). While *Gharbar* presenter Tajunnisa Hasnain defended her work, arguing that many Asian women from 'tight-knitted communities' 'do not get to know the outside host community', not all agreed with her. Lorna Champion, a councillor from Southampton and Rashida Noormohamed, a committed advocate for the inclusion of female Asian media workers, also underscored the paternalistic nature of programmes and that they often treated 'Asian women. . . like they had no common sense' (BBC, 1978b: 7). Noormohamed specifically demanded that Asian women ought to feature prominently beyond the boundaries of ethnic programming in formats such as *Women's Hour* (BBC, 1979b: 8).

Members of the IPU (and later, APU) did not limit themselves to critiquing the BBC and its policies. Working closely with the Commission on Racial Equality and the Institute of Race Relations, they committed producers for local radio stations and appointed community relations officers and social workers. By the early 1980s, the Units were also able to point to work that the ITV and Channel 4 were doing to address immigration and race relations. The members of the Unit were under the general impression that the ITV and later Channel 4 were quicker to respond to the communities' representational needs (BBC, 1983a: 11), and as a result, when the BBC's Education Officer

(Midlands) John Robottom denied the Units religious programming as it might indoctrinate children, Shamin Rehman was quick to respond that ITV was already showing programmes on Hinduism and that there were no complaints (BBC, 1983b: 6). The Units further criticised the lack of improvement of BBC's employment policy in comparison to ITV, which had already hired Trinidadian British Trevor McDonald as a reporter and newsreader in 1973 (BBC, 1981b: 3).

In 1980, ITV's London Weekend Television (LWT) launched the documentary programme *Skin* (1980–1982) produced by British Indian Samir Shah and British Guianian Trevor Phillips, a long-time critic of the BBC's divisive multiculturalism (Baldwin and Rozenberg, 2004). *Skin* was aimed at both British Caribbean and British Asian viewers and discussed a range of topics including white supremacy and race riots, the decrease of British Asian cinemas, false hospitalisation and NHS abuse, and so on. Not surprisingly, these crucial shifts in the British television landscape prompted the Units to rethink their relationship with the BBC.

## Re-imagining integration: The units set demands

Dissatisfied with the BBC's approach to the question of 'integration', British Asian representatives pushed for change along multiple fronts. Despite the BBC's efforts to keep immigrant programming local and at the margins of popular viewing times, the Units demanded more time on national television and radio and better scheduling of programming. Further, to move Asian and Caribbean-focused programming into mainstream television, they suggested subtitling of Asian programmes for white, English-speaking audiences and organising Hindi and Urdu language lessons for those who engaged actively with the immigrant communities. These demands were rebuffed, with BBC officials citing either a lack of financial resources or arguing that too much ethnic programming could further alienate rather than integrate the audiences (BBC, 1967: 6).

Demands for more airtime were combined with a push for primetime slots, to ensure participation and integration on equal terms. Mr Gonsalves from the Indian High Commission supported such suggestions and hoped that the Units' programmes could potentially be shown at peak viewing times on national television. However, Mr Beech, Controller Midlands, BBC, argued that a high percentage of magazine material was inevitably spoken word and therefore unintelligible to the general audience. Subtitling was also deemed impractical due to the costs involved. Over the years, the Units became accustomed to the BBC's fears of alienating majority viewers and assumptions that white viewers would steer clear of programmes that dealt with the realities of racism in Britain. For instance, even a proposal for an Asian cooking show was rejected by the BBC on the grounds of 'serious financial concerns,' 'unsatisfactory levels of revenues derived of licence fees of minorities,' such a show's 'marginal interest to majority viewers,' and that a possible overrepresentation might lead to growing racism (BBC, 1977: 21). Even the most concerted efforts by the Units led to few concrete changes.

Recruitment became another arena of contestation for the Units. The BBC admitted that it faced difficulties in integrating Asian and Caribbean media workers (BBC, 1976a: 2) and by the end of the 1970s an internal report found that 'less than 5% of BBC employees were non-European' (BBC, 1979a: 5). Throughout the years, Units' members drew

attention to 'racist practices' (BBC, 1983a, 10) and 'colonial outlook' (BBC, 1984a: 2) in the BBC's employment strategies and proposed 'reverse discrimination' in recruitment and representation in favour of members of ethnic minorities, a demand the BBC never put into practice. Inspired by American ideals of affirmative action (BBC, 1981b: 7), members such as Dr Parekh, Ms Noormohamed, Dr Muhammed Anwar (Head of research at the CRE) and Sharan Sandhu, a Reuters journalist, argued that only 'positive discrimination' and close monitoring would be able to correct the BBC's imbalance (BBC, 1979a: 6, 1981b: 7). Such proposals were again rejected on the basis that they would be illegal and that they would 'arouse antagonism of the majority population' (BBC, 1983a: 11).

## **The end of the units**

By the end of the 1970s, the Asian Units saw a flood of policy papers and reports such as 'The Future of Broadcasting' report of the Annan Committee which defined the Units' role as devoted to 'helping the immigrant community settle down in Britain' and recommended that once this aim had been achieved the advisory committees should be dissolved (BBC, 1986: 2). Chairman Lord Chitnis and the members of the APAC found such statements offensive and accused the BBC of reproducing the same prejudice and ignorance as other institutions in British society (BBC, 1981a: 4). The report sparked debates within the Units on the state of broadcasting and race relations as well as the significance of the Units themselves (BBC, 1981a: 9–10). In all their years of working, the Units' *raison d'être* was articulated around their service to the BBC in achieving 'racial integration,' a goal that the Units determined was a failed project by the late 1970s (BBC, 1977: 34). However, many members felt that the Units ought to continue their work to attract viewers of the wider community to achieve 'two-way-integration'. Mr Kohli, a Punjabi Sikh from Glasgow, found that rather than aiming for wider racial harmony the Unit could only achieve 'cultural acceptance' (BBC, 1982: 3). Others, such as Dr Parekh, a political theorist, argued that the committee should not give up its work as long as the 'attitudes of white society created problems for minorities' (BBC, 1981b: 4).

Despite many fervent appeals, the BBC insisted on the disintegration of the Units and argued that demographic changes – the growing percentage of Asians born and raised in Britain – meant that specialised programmes were no longer necessary (BBC, 1984b: 5). The hiring of Equal Opportunities Officers and a new Local Radio Advisory Structure were considered sufficient to ensure more Asian voices were heard by the BBC (BBC, 1987b: 8). John Wilkinson, Director of Public Affairs, found that in multicultural Britain, broadcasting had undergone major economic, technological and organisational changes and that Asians were sufficiently represented in the BBC as a whole, making specialised Units obsolete (BBC, 1984a: 15). He suggested one English language programme for Asian viewers, while programmes in various 'mother-tongues' were to be shifted to regional radio (BBC, 1986: 2). While members of the Units were keenly aware that their arguments would not persuade the BBC's senior management to revisit the decision, they did feel 'railroaded' by these changes (BBC, 1986: 3). They criticised the BBC's approach of lumping together 'minority audiences' (BBC, 1987d: 4) and argued that dissolving the

Units would do irreparable harm to the Asian community and not allow them to speak as one voice (BBC, 1987e: 2). The Units stopped their work in October 1988.

Chairman Dipak Nandy described the Unit members' hostility towards the BBC in face of their involuntary disintegration (BBC, 1986: 2). Nevertheless, drawing to a close of the final meeting of the APAC, Nandy looked back with pride and emphasised the great influence the Units have had on the BBC (BBC, 1987c: 9). Acknowledging tensions between the aspirations of the APAC and the BBC, he found cause for some optimism in the fact that more people than ever before were watching Asian-directed programmes. Expressing hope for increasing representation of minorities in the future, especially at the senior levels of the BBC, Nandy drew the meeting to a close with a request for all former members to stay in touch and continue to work towards improving the lives of Britain's racial and ethnic minorities.

## Conclusion

Between the 1950s and the 1970s, several institutions such as A. Sivanandan's Institute of Race Relations were set up to assist the government in addressing racism and race relations in postcolonial Britain. Over the decades, these satellite institutions became the central arena in which British Asian and British Caribbean actors could negotiate the boundaries of belonging and recognition in postcolonial Britain from within. In this article, we have focused on the period during the 1960s when British Asians were invited to have a seat at the table to negotiate the link between public broadcasting and race relations in Britain, only to discover that their work would be heavily constrained by the BBC's managerial logics and imaginations of who constituted the British 'public'. While the members of the Units continually pushed boundaries – arguing about both ethnic broadcasting programmes and critiquing the BBC's general programming – the Units themselves functioned like satellites. Orbiting around the core, their work and decisions were dependent entirely on the approval of the BBC's senior management, and their opportunities to produce content that would challenge the status quo remained limited.

Within the guardrails set up by the BBC, the work of the Units fit neatly within the ongoing culturalisation of race relations and became part of a system of racial governance (Saha, 2018) that ensured majority audiences were never disturbed by politically charged representations of British Asian and British Caribbean communities. Demands for better scheduling of programming, more specific and less discriminatory terminology, more inclusive recruitment strategies as well as better representation of South Asian women in the UK were brought up as crucial for overcoming formulaic and largely assimilationist radio and television programming. Over a period of nearly three decades, these units worked towards an agenda of two-way-integration that would align British Broadcasting to Britain's changing realities. But as Hendy (2022: 349) notes in his exploration of hundred years of BBC's history, even the BBC's more progressive programme makers saw their role in educating immigrants, not being educated by them. As we have shown in this paper, the Units' demands were never taken on board by the BBC. The BBC's broader focus on an identity politics highlighting the communities' languages and religions as inassimilable problems worked to exclude the anti-racist media work of both British Asians and Caribbeans at the time.

We have also highlighted moments in which British Asians working in these Units made valiant attempts to reach out and forge solidarities with Caribbean media producers working towards a vision of political Blackness. There was an awareness of the importance of a shared struggle against racism rooted in skin colour. However, the politics of divide and rule, fine-tuned during the colonial era and now brought to bear in a post imperial moment, often curtailed any consolidated mobilisation against racist representation and exclusion. In the late 1970s, the hardening of discourses around racial differences and extreme racial violence did foster a brief moment of independent, antiracist Black and Asian media work (e.g. programmes like *Skin*) that were later incorporated into Channel 4 and a particular, market-driven understanding of multiculturalism. Nevertheless, ITV and Channel 4 did offer an important counter-balance and pushed the BBC to reflect more carefully on its relationship with Asian and Caribbean audiences and media producers. This terrain of mediation and negotiation between the British public and shifting broadcasting regime(s) remains a rich site for future research.

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