

# The Empire Comes Back

*By Khush Jandu Quiney*

## **Part 1**

I want to start off this story with some context on the imperialist powers that landed around the world to take on the “burden” of “civilising” native people in their homelands as Kipling, one of Britain’s most infamous writers and poets, put it. Throughout time, Britain has invaded all but twenty-two countries around the world at some point hence the phrase ‘the sun never sets on the British Empire’. For this story I am going to focus on the colonisation of India because while this is probably one of the more well-known tales of imperialism, I have always felt that it is never told authentically to the people that were forced to suffer under Britain’s 200 year regime. The stories my parents have always told me always would contradict my history lessons when it came to this subject. Many events that underwent during this period are either told untruthfully or not at all.

I believe I first came to question the real impact that the British empire had on the people of the Indian Subcontinent after a conversation with my parents about the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. They told me how in 1919, british troops under the command of General RH Dyer fired their rifles across a crowd of over 10,000 unarmed men, women and children with no warning. The innocent civilians were protesting the ban on public meetings that was brought in under the foreign rule. Another large majority of the people were celebrating the Sikh festival of Vaisakhi as the sight in which the mass-murder happened is located just round the back of the Harmandir Sahib, or The Golden Temple in english. This is one of the most holy sites for Sikhs located in Amritsar, Punjab. During the killing spree, the british troops trapped all the people so that they had nowhere to escape to. In an attempt to flee the spray of bullets, many people jumped into the well that is in the centre of the site.

One of the people who witnessed the event as a child was Shaheed Udham Singh whose family died in the massacre. When he grew up in 1940, Shaheed followed General Dyer to England and shot him in Holborn, avenging the innocent lives destroyed in the massacre years before. As a result he was hung and his body was buried in Pentonville prison. To many he was a hero and has been given the title of Shaheed-i-Azam (the great martyr) for his attempt at getting justice for his family and others at the site who were brutally murdered. The date of his death is now a public holiday in Punjab to commemorate what he did.

Whether you believe in this kind of 'violent revenge', it goes without saying that the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre was a horrific event that has had a lasting impact on India today and was one of many barbaric and murderous attacks on innocent civilians. Up until 2017, when Sadiq Khan visited Amritsar, there was never a push from higher British powers to apologise for the massacre. Leaders like Shashi Tharoor have commented how both the Queen and David Cameron have visited the site to pay their respects but have carefully avoided making an apology. London's first British-Asian mayor stated *"I am clear that the government should now apologise, especially as we reach the centenary of the massacre. This is about properly acknowledging what happened here and giving the people of Amritsar and India the closure they need through a formal apology,"* which is definitely the kind of energy we need in regard to this subject, especially as some British sources claim that the massacre never happened and is based upon rumor and fiction. However if you are ever to visit the site, the bullet holes in the walls speak for themselves.

If you haven't already gathered, the empire was for the benefit of the British and not the native people living in the countries that were taken over by their rule. After a tenuous 200 years of foreign rule, the call for independence from not just India, but Caribbean and African nations to be ruled by themselves as a pose to a department in Whitehall became stronger. There were organisations like the Gardar Party who advocated the movement by challenging the British. However, the reason for the end of colonial rule ended because Britain simply didn't have the resources to continue. With Britain left in ruins after World War 2 the government needed to focus on rebuilding the UK.

Before making their exit, Britain decided to divide the Indian Subcontinent into three distinct regions; two muslim and one hindu despite the fact that Gandhi and Nehru were both secularists, believing that India is for all religions to coexist together. The border was drawn up by British lawyer Cecil Radcliffe in Whitehall who had never been to India before and was given 40 days to do so using old, inaccurate maps. This started in the North West, cutting through the state of Punjab where my family are from. The idea of splitting the nation up based on religion is ridiculous as India has a long-standing history of religions existing side by side, tolerant of each other. For example, while India's predominant religion was Hinduism, Islam had a significant presence in India with a 400 year old influence on culture, music, politics, food and fashion. India has the biggest muslim population outside of Malaysia. It is also important to note that people didn't identify themselves through religion, but

by village and that was the uniting factor rather than who you worshipped. My grandfather would tell stories of his close friend from the village whose family had been there for hundreds years and was a muslim sweet maker. However, literally overnight on the 15th of August, 1947, he was forced, like millions of others to leave or convert to hinduism. Bloodshed followed with riots and mass migration. Both sides feared religious persecution and therefore were forced to try and make it across the borders to escape death. During partition, 1 million people were killed with 14 million people displaced; split up from their families and communities. The most bloodshed happened in Punjab and Bengal where the border cut through provinces which held people of all religions. Kashmire also became the epicentre of rivalry, where it still is to this day, over the ownership of the land.

Partition is a perfect example of divide and rule. The saddest thing to come out of this catastrophe, aside from the deaths and family breakups, is the fact that it changed the whole makeup of the subcontinent and now the country seems to focus on the border and what separates us from one another instead of what unites us. The conflict between Musims and Hindus/Sikhs or between Pakistanis and Indians stems from the very same imperial powers that once ruled us all so why are we letting them still control us when they're long gone, these are and will always be our neighbours. Recent attacks by a Hindu Nationalists mob descended in India's capital, New Delhi attacking and targeting Muslim buisnessess and homes. More than 50 people were killed and hundreds were injured in the violence. This begs the question, did we learn nothing from partition? Our religions have a history of peaceful coexistence and tolerance from the beginning of time. First-born males in Hindu families are often given Sikh surnames while Sikh gurdwaras will always open their doors to anyone seeking refuge and feed them as a part of the culture. In the recent case I mentioned earlier of the Islamaphobic attacks many videos on social media have circulated showing just that as victims seeked sanctuary in India and in the UK where similar abuse is not uncommon. Funnily enough also spurred by people in our government you could also describe as 'nationalists', but I will get to that later. They want us to turn against each other so that the way the British Empire treated, and continues to treat the ex colonies and commonwealth will be excused.

**A**s previously mentioned, the British needed to build railways and infrastructure in East africa so that they could effectively extract the resources from it. They had a policy of having a division between them and Africans, so they essentially brought in Indian labourers to do the work and act

as a 'buffer' for the British. As a part of that scheme my dad's 'Papaji' went to work on the building sites there in Uganda as our family history is of a carpenter cast.

My dad's 'Mamaji', and everyone in the family of that generation that were with them in Uganda always say how they had the best times there. With the climate, the plentiful resources and the communities of other Asian people, it was a really special time for them and my dad who was born there. The houses were built around a central courtyard, where their neighbours were a Muslim family who would also take care and look out for him. As a child they would take my dad with their children to the river to wash and bathe in the morning. This also proves my point that, even after what happened in partition, people lived together as Asians or Indians and not Muslim, Sikh or Hindu. Because they were in Africa the same rules didn't apply as they did in India which meant they didn't get caught up in the rivalry that many people later adopted. My dad recalls that whether it was Diwali or Ramadan or Vaisakhi, a family birth or a wedding, they would spend it together and were respectful of each other's religions.

Once Papaji had saved enough money working in Uganda, he went back to India where he began to build a new house for Mamaji and their children. However within two years of living in India, he was then invited to go to England by an uncle who said that there were jobs there. Papaji had been warned to cut his hair, practicing Sikhs grow it out and wear a turban which is what he did, they said he'd be able to get jobs easier but he refused. My dad jokes this is the same reason why he did it twenty years later! So Papaji went over with my Tiaji (uncle) while my dad and my Phua (aunty) stayed in the village in India with Mamaji. My dad always claims his 'feminist disposition' and sensitivity comes from being raised by three women.

The village, Mansuher, near the city of Ludhiana in Punjab was where my great grandad had his workshop. This is where he would fix farming tools, houses, and make furniture and such for people in the village. He was an extremely caring individual and was the person many people would talk to when seeking advice. Some of my dad's fondest memories were of a well near the workshop where he would sit on a wooden platform that was pushed around by a water buffalo to bring the water up. There was a particular buffalo that was more aggressive and would jolt him back and forth if he vexed it by giving it a whack with a stick. In the next field to the workshop there were goats that he and his cousin would try to ride like horses for hours on end, they would creep up and try to climb on but it would always end up flinging them off in a crazy frenzy. His biggest delight would be bringing one of the steel cups from home to the

workshop with a thick layer of sugar at the bottom so when he'd take it to his grandad, he would milk it straight into the cup fresh for him and give it a stir. According to him, this is incomparable to any vegan milk alternative.

When Papaji had saved enough money, the rest of the family came over to England from India, on a flight via Baghdad. His first impressions of the country upon his arrival were grey. Obviously nobody in the family had cars in those days so it was down to someone's auntiji's brother-in-law's nephew as it often is with the asian community. On the drive home, my dad found the streets with terraced houses bizarre. As he had come from an environment of complete open space he didn't understand how people lived so close together and were a lot more confined. When they got to Papaji's aunt's house which they were staying in, Mamaji opened the first door and he ran ahead to try and open the neighbours door as well because he didn't understand the concept of it being separate houses. Mamaji, Papaji, my dad and his three siblings all lived in one room in that house for about six months. After his surprise of lack of space you would have thought this would have been a dampener on coming to live in England but he is adamant that he never once felt deprived and because he had so much family around him he felt the love even more. In the living room there was a black and white TV which he remembers being utterly fascinated by; in the village someone would have a projector and show bollywood films every now and then which everyone would turn up to and watch but it was nothing like having your own personal one in your house. Another funny story that he recalls as a five year old was his first interaction and experiences with a proper flushing toilet. Obviously back in the village, he was used to the standard whole in the ground procedure. For a maybe a month, he would relieve himself by squatting with his feet on the toilet seat, leaving a mark from his shoes on it. This eventually alerted the rest of the family to what he was doing and he soon learned after that.

## ***Part 2***

Soon enough, my father was registered at the local school. He had some formal education from India and hence spoke a bit of english, although not much and was forced to pick it up quickly in the new environment. Here he met my uncle Kam and uncle Amrik who they joke were the only other Indians in the village until my dad showed up - and they haven't forgiven him since! The school they attended had two catchment areas; the white, working class estates and the Asian area. As you can imagine there was a significant culture clash and there was very little mixing between the two groups. Recalling

playing kiss chase in the playground as a kid, my dad always comments “ain’t no one guna be chasing an Indian boy!”

In the classroom there was absolutely no encouragement or any expectations for asians to achieve and excel academically; almost laughable when you think of the stereotype now of asian people of all being complete geeks. He’d frequently tell teachers he wanted to grow up to be a lawyer and to the white majority of the classe’s amusement, they would respond that the only thing he’d ever achieve was working in a factory. One time my dad asked his teacher how many exams he would be taking, to which he replied “sit down sonny, you won’t be doing any exams, you are fodder for the line”, referring to him being cheap labour for the assembly lines in car factories. As you can see, life at school for asians was extremely disheartening with teachers frequently putting down students despite the immense motivation that came from home to do well. Papaji always said to take advantage of the opportunities he didn’t get, like education and my dad has consequently done the same with my siblings and I, the one thing he won’t compromise on because he knows how lucky we are to not have the same prejudice.

Outside of the classroom, travelling to and from school posed its own kind of threat. You would constantly have to watch out for being attacked and assaulted on a daily basis due to the colour of his skin. My dad was the tallest in his group, wore a turban and was confident and expressive making him a source of target from violent skinheads. He had to learn very quickly which parts of Coventry were no-go-areas and the best ways to walk home to avoid the violence that often came his way. In his first and second year at school, you took the abuse and that’s just the way it was. However my dad clearly remembers being completely enlightened by two asian boys in the year above who were also confident; they wore Levi jeans and Adidas trainers and had that swagger about them that he’d never seen in anyone else that looked like him before. One time there was a punch up in the park between these individuals and a group of white thugs. To his surprise, they took them on and stood their ground which was an extremely significant turning point in my dad's life aged eleven. After witnessing that, his own attitude shifted and he vowed himself to take on any skinhead that came for him in the future.

Playing football, the opposing teams would call them ‘black bastards’ as they violently assaulted them on the pitch, however soon the Asian team came together and decided to stop taking it and to have them on instead. As he grew older, he got to know how there were certain clubs and pubs that you never went to, firstly as an asian, you’d never get let in but if you somehow did manage to, you’d always end up getting assaulted - my dad being my dad

frequently found himself in this position. One time he was attacked by skinheads at one of these functions and defended himself from the violence. He was subsequently arrested and locked up for the night while the skinheads were let free. He was charged despite the fact he only acted out of defense. The first and second time he went to court, the police officers didn't show up and so the solicitor said they'd give him a bind-over as punishment. He could tell the magistrate really wanted to put him away and get him in some serious trouble but given that he was willing to accept the bind-over she knew that if they left the court for a third time, the case would've had to get dropped. Instead she made sure that instead of the bind-over lasting one year, it was extended to two.

The violence and abuse that my dad and the rest of the asian community faced didn't just stay on the streets. When they bought their new house, my dad remembers the neighbours shutting their curtains in disgust. Frequently the words "pakis" and "wogs" would appear spray painted on the garage or the front door and on many occasions people would post dog shit through the letterbox. Mamaji was spat in the face numerous times on her way to the Gurdwara or shopping and would often come home tearful as a result. My dad also remembers feeling upset when his nephew who was five at the time came home from school asked him what 'brown bread' was as that was what the other kids in his class had been calling him. My dad went on to explain that brown bread was just as good and tasty as white bread, even better for you, but obviously he knew what they were referring to. When five year olds are using that kind of insult you have to wonder where it is coming from.

After scraping together his A-levels in the three sciences (the stereotype had to come from somewhere!) My dad delayed uni for two years to stay at home and support the family. As he was the first person in his family with formal education, everyone was anxious about letting him leave home yet extremely proud and encouraging of him. To study economics, my dad arrived at Middlesex where he found there were a great variety of people from different walks of life and communities. There was a huge eastern european as well as many people of afro-caribbean heritage. He also found that there were many international students. Through talking to all of these people he gained a new perspective about the injustices served by people of colour through not just police violence but also that coming from the governments in their country of origin. This was during the heights of the independence movement in Africa, particularly the Namibia movement as well as heightened conflict in Palestine. Many of the students had first hand injustices and experience. One of my dad's first campaigns that he organised while he was at uni was



supporting the international students who had their fees tripled, hindering the chance for many of them to receive the education.

In January 1981, there was an arson attack, suspected of racial motivations, at Yvonne Ruddock's sixteenth birthday party, known as the New Cross Massacre. Yvonne and twelve of her guests were burned to death with another later committing suicide. At the time, police treated the victims of the fire as though they were suspects and handled the investigation so appallingly that no one was ever convicted despite the nature of the attack. Somehow I can't see to believe that if it was thirteen white youths that had been murdered that this would have been the case. Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister at the time didn't even offer her condolences on the matter even though this was one of the largest single losses of life in post-war Britain. What is more, no one really knows about it. You can see how this mistreatment and dismissal of young black kids who were murdered shows how 1980's Britain did not see this as a significant loss of life even though every single victim was a British citizen, and that the majority of their parents would have been too. This pattern of injustice to people of colour followed by disregard from police was repeated in many cases across the country with racist attacks and police violence being the common theme. In the following months, there was a call for a Black People's Day of Action. Black people, and members of other minority groups discriminated against met in New Cross to demonstrate across the city. They marched across Waterloo Bridge and up to Fleet Street where all the newspaper outlets used to be to protest how the death of black people was being undermined and underplayed by the media. It ended in Hyde Park where there were a number of confrontations with the police.

Similarly, there was an incident with 12 Asian youths in Bradford who were picked up and locked up in the summer of '81 for stocking up on petrol bombs and other weaponry of a similar nature. This was due to the fact that these minority communities felt under threat from racist attacks and knew that the police would not be there to defend them and therefore these individuals took it into their own hands to defend their people. For example, in Southall, West London, there were two attacks on Asian and Caribbean communities when the police and government allowed The National Front to have a meeting in the town hall. The same morning, the local authorities set up roadblocks to try and contain protesters but what happened was that everyone else from the local area had to pass through to reach home or wherever they were going. On that day, the police made 836 arrests and at least 500 of those people were given prison sentences for protesting against racists. This clearly shows how much the system is absolutely geared against the justice for people of colour.

Another example of this was in the same month when two coaches worth of skinhead punk fans arrived in Southall to support a band that was due to play that evening in a local pub. Arriving well before the performance, the fans physically went and assaulted shoppers and businesses along the Broadway. People in the community already knew the police would not protect them from the fascists, if anything they were on the same side. Instead, through phone calls, and news spreading through gurdwaras and pubs, within thirty minutes everyone came out to the streets to have the skinheads on whether it was young people with petrol bombs or aunties with sticks. Led by the Southall youth, they pushed them over the bridge and out of town as well as burning down the pub that they were supposed to be playing in that evening. Unsurprisingly, the police turned up and started protecting the skinheads as was the standard at the time.

These were all campaigns that my dad worked on while he was at uni. He led defense programmes in Southall on housing estates and in minority communities to organise against the racial attacks before going to Heathrow Airport to help predominantly Asian cleaners who were being exploited similarly at work. His focus then became racism in employment as he became a trade unionist, working as a researcher where he met my mum who was working on similar anti-racist campaigns. At the TUC he advised trade unionists and therefore employers to tackle racism at work, to improve links between trade unions and communities and raise awareness around anti-racism. During this time there were many cases he worked on, one of the most high-profile being the Stephan Lawrence case.

On the 22nd of April 1993, two black youths, Stephan and his friend were waiting for a bus in Eltham when a gang of white people attacked them. Stephan was stabbed and murdered as he bled out at the scene. When the police arrived, rather than being concerned that there was an urgent medical requirement and need, they were more fixated on the fact that they were black and essentially all they could see was drug or gang related violence. Subsequently they failed to properly investigate the murder leaving major shortfalls and negligence to essential evidence that almost certainly led to a conviction of Stephan's killers. They didn't even pick up the perpetrators and lost a bag of clothing that was put out by the bins outside of their houses with evidence of the crime. There was a whole catalogue of errors. Both my parents worked on the campaign with Stephan's parents Doreen and Neville that eventually after four years or so consequented in the MacPherson enquiry which sat at Elephant & Castle. They took evidence from families, campaigners, institutions as well as putting the police and four accused in the dock for questioning. The conclusion of the inquiry in the form of a 350 page

report was that the initial investigation into the killing had been “marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership.” They also later found out that there was also corruption within the police force that handled the investigation which further hindered the journey to justice for Stephan. You have to question why weren't the police able to give the victim, a British citizen, the public service that he needed. All they saw were the negative stereo-types associated with his race, what kind of culture sustains this way of thinking? Many institutions had the same culture of racism by discriminating against people of colour in a more indirect way. The new Labour government that came into power at this time did try a lot to address and look into that deep rooted culture and change it. At this point, my dad was employed by the car company Ford to do the same in their factories.

The thread between all of this dates back to imperial times where events like the Slave Trade and the Jallinwala Bagh Massacre were initiated by Great Britain in an attempt to control these countries. This culture of seeing people of colour as unequal and not even human in most cases runs deep through our country in the form of conscious and subconscious racism. While on the whole I look back at the environment my dad grew up in compared to the present day and yes - baby steps have been made to equality. However you just have to look at tragedies like Grenfell, Stop and Search statistics or schemes like Brexit that focus on dividing us to humble this feeling of development. Britain is a country built off of the backs of others. They paid for the First World War's efforts out of India's resources and built their own economy off of the profit from slavery. We will not be able to move forward into being a country of equality until we start being open and honest about Britain's past.