

AHRC Funded Research Grant 2007-10

Making Britain: Visions of Home and Abroad 1870-1950 (Open University)

The project will examine the formative South Asian contributions to Britain's cultural, literary and political life in the period, looking in particular at influential affiliations and groupings working at the heart of empire. It will examine how the early presence of a substantial population from the subcontinent (known as 'India' at the time), helped to mould the complex, multi-layered formations of contemporary Britain's cultural-political identities, a factor often overlooked in standard literary and cultural histories. Combining literary theoretical, cultural-critical and historical insights, the project will be led by Professor Susheila Nasta of the Open University in collaboration with Professor Elleke Boehmer (University of Oxford) and Dr Ruvani Ranasingha (King's College, the University of London). It will be further supported by formal partnerships with the British Library and SALIDAA (South Asian Literature and Arts of the Diaspora Archive) and regular input from senior art historians Professors Deborah Swallow (Courthauld Institute, London) and Partha Mitter (Wolfson, Oxford), and distinguished historian Dr Rozina Visram (SALIDAA). Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that will illuminate previously unexplored connections between a wide range of archival sources, we will compare the diverse ways in which South Asian writers, artists, activists and professionals formed influential affiliations, groupings, and solidarities within Britain, contributing vitally to making Britain a dynamic 'contact zone' at the heart of empire itself. Paying close attention to historical contexts, as well as conditions of production and reception, a key element will be to analyse the modes by which cultural expression, in its different forms, structured South Asian migrant and metropolitan realities. An urgent need still exists to heighten public awareness of the depth of the historical contribution of South Asians to British culture. Extending present-day notions of the 'British-Asian' and the South Asian 'diaspora' backwards in time, this project will complicate the persistent assumption that a homogenous British culture only began to diversify in the period of mass migration post-World War II. (For example, the concept of equal rights for imperial citizens under the British Crown was strategically mobilized by various South Asian groupings seeking representation within the metropolis.) Apart from fostering new dialogues across disciplinary boundaries, the project embraces a firm commitment to educational outreach and will make its outcomes accessible in the public domain.

Further information about the project will soon be available on the project website. For further information in the meantime please contact Professor Susheila Nasta (s.m.nasta@open.ac.uk)