

unger people with schools and more concern about proximity to work and cultural activities.

Both these developments have strongly increased demand among the younger, upper and middle-income groups to live in the central and inner parts of the city. This feeling is echoed in the most of the major cities throughout America, boosted by recent increases in the price of suburban housing. Indeed, in the last few years, reversing the trend of the previous quarter century, the young, white, college-educated professionals were the *only* group to return to the central cities, in comparison with their contemporaries of a decade ago. Manhattan, with its unique lifestyle, its 24-hour transport system, its many cultural, educational and recreational facilities, and its 24-hour computerised banking systems, is an unrivalled attraction for this generation. Whether you want to indulge publicly in sex at Plato's Retreat, take breakfast classes in business management at the New School, enjoy opera and ballet at the City, bargain-hunt in the lower East Side, roller-skate in Central Park or eat lunch in Greenwich Village, Manhattan offers experiences that can't be found in the sprawling suburbs.

But the demand to live in Manhattan is confined to certain areas. Harlem, of course, is largely untouched. Some of the gain has been absorbed through converting lofts (old warehouse and industrial premises). Much of this is illegal: New Yorkers seem more prepared to ignore or contest restrictive planning regulations than Londoners. Belatedly, by European standards, inflation and rising rents have caused the price of cooperative apartments to more than double in the last 18 months.

### The problem for the poor

The young, mobile and relatively affluent people who dominate the housing market in Manhattan need no sympathy. For if accommodation is hard to find and rents are high, it is because of their demand. A generation ago, such people had to make do with less space and shared apartments. Now they can afford the privilege of living alone. The situation of the lower-income households is another matter.

In New York, the problem of scarce accommodation can be traced back to lifting rent control from many apartment and houses in the early 1970s. The decontrol of apartment buildings has progressively reduced the supply of cheap accommodation. So the recent influx of middle and upper income households has come on top of an already serious situation. But if the population has declined, why couldn't the poor find equivalent accommodation elsewhere? Part of the answer is that when there is no demand for their property, landlords have little choice but to abandon it. For in America, unlike Britain, the cities are not losing buyers of inner-city housing. Even vacant property, landlords are liable for property taxes. But they may also abandon occupied buildings, if the rental income does not cover their minimum costs. Few

of them can afford to absorb a loss in the hope of future capital appreciation. And in New York, the costs of heating, lifts and basic upkeep are particularly high—not to mention taxes. There are other factors, as well: insurance frauds are a growing problem. But the bedrock is profitability.

The loss of population is an important factor. Inevitably, it is in fact a question of numbers. For if the population falls, the whole housing stock can only be occupied if there is either a very sharp fall in household sizes or small units are converted into larger apartments. But the reason that many poor households in New York are worse off is due to two additional factors: the rapid inflation in landlords' costs and the blighting effects of abandonment itself.

For many landlords, the rise in their costs has come as the last straw. The minimum rent they are prepared to accept has risen much faster than their tenants' incomes. Faced with no apparent demand, they eventually opt for abandonment. Or so it is argued. The difficulty with this account, however, is that large numbers of apartments in the poor districts of Harlem, Brooklyn and the Bronx are still let at rents similar to those that are being abandoned. Landlords, of course, don't all react in the same way. Nor is the situation of all tenants the same: some may have their rents covered by welfare payments, while others do not. But these factors do not explain the large numbers of apartments available for rent in low-income areas at the same rents as those that are occu-



ried. However, clearly rent control alone is not the main reason for abandonment.

The important, and most worrying factor is the blighting effect of abandonment itself. Most of the available apartments are in the areas of abandoned property. The effects are cumulative. One or two apartments become empty for lack of takers, or the landlord's financial position, and very quickly the whole block, if not the whole street, becomes desolated.

### Carter's failure

Measures to stop people leaving would help; but here there is little prospect that Carter's urban policy will have a major impact. Public acquisition of occupied dwellings would stem the rot; but this is ruled out by the long-standing aversion to social housing. Community projects and "sweat equity" (in which tenants rehabilitate property in return for occupancy rights) are being supported, but the impact is local. Yet on cost grounds alone, it is imperative for the city to find some solution. This is because the rent needed to forestall abandonment is much lower than that needed to induce reinvestment, and more public sector costs will be required to save an area where abandonment is rife.

New York now owns more than 5,000 buildings, due to tax defaults. By 1980, this is expected to reach 15,000, housing some 75,000 families. Surely here there is potential for providing stable low-income housing to counteract the effects of gentrification and abandonment. In a hopeful change of policy, New York's Mayor Koch has shifted responsibility for the management of this stock from the city's real estate to its housing department. But the problem is of finance, as much as ideology. At present, the operating deficit on these properties is being met out of federal funds. But this is only temporary as Congress has dictated that revenue-sharing funds must not be used to support the long-run acquisition and operation of public housing.

Recentralisation and abandonment have one useful aspect, however: they open up the suburbs to middle-income households, and in particular to minorities. Ten years ago there was heated debate about the merits of dispersal. Now, ironically, it is coming about as the by-product of something that no one dreamed would occur, the spontaneous move back to the central cities of the affluent whites.

In New York, life tends to extremes. The housing situation is no exception. Luxury coexists with squalor; new investment with dereliction. The underlying logic of the market—or lack of it—is starkly exposed, as identical structures undergo expensive rehabilitation or are brutally torn apart in different neighbourhoods. Opportunities are strictly defined by ethnic and income status. If you are young and white and single, or a black, middle class family with children, then the prospects in New York may seem encouraging. But for the poor of all races, and the ageing white middle class, New York's revived economic fortunes offer only painful adjustment.

### The Asians of Leicester: 2

# The misfits of a new generation

Mihir Bose

The parents concentrate on 'getting on' (as last week's article showed). But what about the young Asians?

Beneath characteristic Asian differences, the more pervasive English ones of class and generation have begun to emerge among the Asians of Leicester.

Leicester Polytechnic's campus cafe has the characteristic student coffee bar atmosphere: old ladies struggling to serve teas and snacks to a long line of students, a couple of pin-ball machines, and white and Asian students in separate groups. Our group consisted of a mixture of Asian sixth formers and polytechnic students. Rajesh Patel, a Hindu (from Gujerat, India) was sitting his A levels at nearby Gateway school.

A few days before we met, Rajesh had taken part in a studio discussion on BBC Radio Leicester's 630 show. (It is transmitted from 6.30 every weekday evening.) It is compulsory listening for Leicester's Asians and they—including many of Rajesh's relatives—were outraged when he debunked the Hindu caste system, and said that Asian parents were victimising their girls and putting a noose round their necks.

Caught between an English society, in which he is a misfit, and an Indian family which wants him to conform, Rajesh can find no answers to his problems. At Gateway, where the sixth form is mainly Indian he found that "If I talk to white friends my Indian friends get upset—they call me *gora chamcha*—arse-licker of the whites." And his old white friends began to drop him because he had so many Indian friends. Awareness of his race has grown slowly. "In my old school, where I grew up with many English friends, I did not notice any difference. But now I do. When I go to a pub and they serve you last, even though you were first."

### Trouble with the police

Since then he has had sharper reactions. One day, he was wandering round the Melton Road area: "I was near this pub where the Indian yobos are supposed to hang out. The coppers were around, you knew there was trouble. There were two coppers and one of them grabbed me. 'Were you involved in this trouble?' he asked me. 'You look like a hooligan: cream jumpers, tatty jeans, scruffy hair, you are a hooligan. You wogs are all the same.' Then he searched me. I had a bit of money with me, but he wouldn't believe how I got it. He kept me standing round for some time. Then he told me to get lost."

At home, competitive middle class parents are eager that he becomes a success in life,

yet want him to conform to the Indian way of living. Rajesh has come to resent his parents' attempts to brainwash him into becoming a doctor: "Right from an early age, there was this brainwashing. Once I wanted a bicycle and got a chemistry set; at the age of seven my mother brought me a stethoscope. They are always pressuring me to study. In the evenings if I am watching telly, they say, 'Haven't you got any homework? You should be studying instead of watching telly.' They say they'd be disgraced if I didn't do well." And when friends and relatives drop in, he is proudly displayed. "I feel I am terribly patronised. They are always asking everyone, 'Have you met my son? He's a lovely lad you know. He's got an offer from Cardiff, he's a clever lad.' But if I go to a disco, they'll say I'm out with a friend. I find it very difficult to communicate with my parents on a personal level. Things like sex, inter-

racial marriage. I'd never be able to talk to them about it." He had to give up his girl friend when his parents found out and made a fuss about it: it would affect his work. Today he is a loner, studies hard, doesn't go to discos, drink or smoke, and prefers his own company.

His friend Pravin Patel, also a Gujerati Hindu, has had to give up his girl friend. A fellow sixth former at Gateway with Rajesh, he could hardly remember his father's home town of Nawshera in Gujerat, hated caste and "feels English in my ideas." His home background is working class. His father is a bus driver, mother an AEI employee; but the pressures are the same. "I had a girl friend. But we had to stop seeing each other. It was her parents. She told her parents about me. Her parents trusted her and she felt guilty. We don't go out any more, though we still see each other."

Both of them have had trouble with the National Front and with the Sikhs. Two Gujerati boys were beaten up by some Sikh students. The police had to be called in to sort out the trouble and Maurice Bailey, head of Gateway, suspended three students. "You get a bunch of Sikh lads acting big," says Rajesh Patel. "There are quite a few at Gateway. Macho characters—Clint Eastwood types. They fashion themselves on celluloid heroes." Worse in some ways was when the National Front propaganda in the school led to violence. "A lad at our school *Parental pressure can keep Asian boys from daring at the local community centre (below)...*



got beat up. He went to the loo and 15 white lads jumped on him. The headmaster just hushed it up. He assembled every Indian student in the hall and said this is nothing to do with racialism. But if this isn't racial discrimination, what is?"

This racial discrimination has made Kemak Patel, another Gujarati Hindu, aware of his Indian origin. He arrived from Kenya as a child of nine and has never been to India. He read about it later, the way one would read about any foreign country. Before he arrived in Leicester, his experiences in various schools in London and the south east had made him hate Indians. He thought they were narrow: they saw his long hair and scruffy looks and thought he was too western. Then three years in Leicester, and with his experiences at the polytechnic where he is a pharmacy student, he now feels Indian for the first time. He avidly waits for Indian cricket scores.

At his polytechnic, whites and Asians rarely mix. "Out of about 50 whites, only ten are prepared to talk to us. But it is very superficial. Hi-bye. We are prepared to mix with the white people of the right calibre. But we will only go half way." He spends most of his time now trying to organise the Indians against the menace of racism and the National Front, but finds that most of them are apathetic to everything except studies.

For him, racism and the police are part of the hazard of walking down Melton Road. "I've been picked up several times—must be 15 times, mostly when I am walking round late at night. I've got picked up so often I got to know the copper. I said to him once, 'What you hoping to find by all this?' The copper said, 'You never know. One day I'll get lucky!'"

At home, Kemak faces the same pressures. His communication with his family is limited because he only began learning Gujarati when he came to Leicester and hasn't yet mastered it. He knows his family would be horrified if he married a girl out of his community. "They might accept a white girl, depends on what she is like. A West Indian? They would find that very hard. We come from Africa and we regarded blacks as inferiors. A cousin of mine says West Indians are beasts. But they would draw the line if I married a Muslim. My mother had a relation killed by a Muslim during Hindu-Muslim riots in India and marrying a Muslim would be the worst thing."

### Leaving home

Only one member of the cafeteria group had broken free of parental control—by leaving home. Prashant Patel, a 22 year old pharmacy student at the poly, used to have terrible rows with his father. He couldn't stand me and I couldn't him. He always said after an argument, 'Why don't you leave, or I'll throw you out.' Patel now lives with another Indian and a white.

Yet what is easy, or even possible, for Prashant to do is impossible for Asian girls. And here lies the growing generation problems of the community.

In the winter of 1977, Anita Bhalla, a young Asian woman working at the Leicester community relations office found rather strange cases were being referred to her by the local social services. These included young 16 year old girls running away from home, unwilling to accept their parents' views, and battered wives fleeing oppression. All ended up at the local YWCA—unable to explain their problems to the world outside.

In one typical case, a Gujarati Muslim girl, who had left home once before, again ended up in the YWCA. Nobody could understand her. She stayed with Anita for a time and eventually there was a compromise. The flat above the family shop was let to her and her brother, so that they could set up their own home. But Anita and a few others decided there must be a more permanent solution; and the idea of an Asian hostel was born. This would be a place where Asian women having problems with their families could find a temporary home. From there, they could either negotiate to go back to the family set up, or stay on as an independent person.

Though the community relations council thought it was too hot a potato to handle, Anita Bhalla gathered together a small committee of people. These included Councilor K. M. Shah and Saroj Seth of the Asian Ladies Circle. Urban Aid and the Samaritans gave some money and the project seemed well on its way. But then the storm broke. The older Asians were outraged: it was an insidious attack on Asian life. It revived fears of dominant white culture seeking to undermine the Asian one.

A thousand people sent a petition to the council in protest, and even some supporters began to waver. Councilor Shah who had campaigned for it decided to withdraw from the committee. Saroj Seth did likewise, because, says Anita Bhalla, of family pressure.

Though younger Asians have spoken up for it, work on the hostel, which has received council permission and a Department of Environment grant, is now mainly in the hands of white liberals. For Anita Bhalla it is a sad story of Asian failure.

She herself has followed the route taken by many of these girls and experienced the same guilt that made Praveen Patel's girl friend stop seeing him. "It is loyalty. We are brought up that way—to respect our parents. Then you might want to do something else, yet remain within the family framework—carry the family with you. It is so difficult. For instance, when I wanted to go to college, it took me months and months to put the question to my parents."

Even when Asian parents recognise the problem, they can find no answer within

the framework they hold on to. Saroj Seth and Mira Trivedi are typical middle class working wives. Saroj Seth's day is programmed to the split second. Get up at 5.30 am, have a bath, "as any Hindu should." Then prayers in a little shrine she has created in her daughter's room (whom she is encouraging to pray). After a quick 15 minute keep-fit exercise she wakes up her husband and daughter at 7.30 am and feeds them; then she leaves for her school by 8.25 am, where she is head of department of English as a second language for immigrant children. She returns home by about 4.30 pm and then most evenings leaves again (after feeding her husband and daughter) for various commitments: classes in Hindi for Europeans involved with Asians, meetings of various race relations organisations and so on. She is proud that her Asian Ladies Circle cuts across the various barriers that divide the community. Yet ask her if she will allow her daughter to have boy friends and she replies, "That is a very personal question. We are a very liberal family, very forward. But we have held on to our culture and identity."

Mira Trivedi feels even more protective towards her community. Like Saroj Seth she combines various roles: housewife, social worker and presenter of the 630 show. She admits there is a generation gap. Per-

haps the answer is, she says, for the "so-called community leaders to organise seminars where boys would meet girls of the same caste, same community." She has two girls, Heena 16, and Bina 13, and she was offended when I asked her if they had boy friends. "No, no. I would not like them to go out with boys. Their first objective is education. They can have boys all their lives." She admitted she would like them to marry Indians. She, after all, has had an outstandingly successful arranged marriage.

Some attempts have been made for Asian boys to meet Asian girls in a controlled atmosphere. Last year Harish Acharya organised an Asian disco. He invited not only the Asian youth, but also their parents—so they could see that Saturday night fever was not all evil. The result was a packed floor throbbing to rock and roll, with Asian parents keeping an eye on their children. But this event was rare.

"We just have no social structure to meet our girls." Satwinder Singh, the speaker, is a 20 year old unemployed mechanical engineer. As he drove me round Leicester, he slowed the car down whenever he saw an Asian girl. At one crossing he saw an Asian girl walking with a white boy: "They want to go out with whites but not with us—that's the problem." He himself has a white girl friend who studies in the University at Loughborough, though she means nothing

to him. "These white girls—you never know where you are with them." But he realises that even if he had an Asian girl, there would be problems. "Asian girls are so emotional. When we take a girl out they want a long relationship. And if their parents find out—chop—finish."

The class divisions in the Asian community are less sharp, but they exist. They converted Avtar Singh from a middle class Indian into a working class immigrant poet. He arrived from India in 1964, proud of his degree from Punjab University. But in Leicester, "I became a manual worker—within one night. It was a great shock. I realised we, the educated people, are doing manual jobs in this country." That released his poetic instincts and today after 15 years as a worker he says, "I like workers. I am a worker. I like the feeling of working class. I glorify them in my writings."

Kewal Singh Lehal has a more authentic working class background. Two widely publicised strikes at the Imperial Typewriters and Mansfield Hosiery politicised a whole generation of Asian workers and were milestones in the evolution of the Indian Workers Association. His is the story of the growing political consciousness of the Indian workers.

When Lehal arrived in England from the Punjab in 1954 to work in a foundry—£6 for 54 hours work—there were barely 100 other Indian workers, and trade union racism was rampant. "There was racism on the shop floor. Even a crane driver's job was reserved for the white boys."

### The Indian Workers Association

In 1959 the Indian Workers Association was set up, in the teeth of official trade union disapproval. The TUC was indifferent, if not hostile: why should Indian workers organise separately, when official trade union machinery already exists? Today the IWA has a nation-wide membership of about 40,000 and Lehal is a prosperous worker with a house of his own and a car.

Satish Kapur, another IWA stalwart and president of the Association of Teachers of Ethnic Minority, sees the IWA fighting a "two-front war," against the open racists and the combination of white liberals and Indian establishment leaders.

He is a middle class economist from Delhi and has bitter memories of his racial wars. His biggest fights have been with the white liberals who claim to speak for the Asians. "Not many years ago, a white Labour councillor, just because he was married to a West Indian, actually led the Indian community. Even now there is a hard core of white activists who claim to be spokesmen for black people."

Yet for all these Asians, Leicester is home. Whether it is Rajesh worrying about his pushy parents, or Saroj Seth struggling to teach ignorant whites the virtues of Asian life, life in Leicester is good, safe and comfortable. As Satwinder Singh puts it: "There is plenty of money in Leicester—if only it could be put together, and if our girls would mix with our boys."

