

[Dharma-Has It Impacted The UK Political Scene?](#)

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Dharma-Has It Impacted The UK Political Scene?

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The Westminster Palace, London, seat of the mother of all democracies and corridors of world power which affected the lives of Hindus for centuries is now itself subject to Hindu influences. Thanks to the Hindu members of Parliament, behind-the scene-Hindu workers and kingmakers, Hindu lobbyists and decision makers, more than a million Hindu voters are able to air their views and flex their collective muscle in Westminster Palace.

Hindus are part of the UK "Asian" community, which includes Muslims, Sikhs and Christians from the Indian subcontinent. Asian politicians elected with the support of the Asian community may be of any of these religions and face the daunting task of pleasing them all. Consequently, in interviewing them, there was a hesitancy on the part of Hindu politicians to say something which might offend the other religious communities. The exception to this was Baroness Shreela Flather, one of 13 Conservative Party working members of the House of Lords. Appointed for life, she doesn't face the same pressures as the others and hence was more willing to speak about Hindus and the UK political scene.

According to Flather, Hindus fit best in the Conservative Party. "I have a joke that I have not met a true Indian socialist," she said, "because I find that they only pay lip service to socialism. They don't actually practice it. It is not in their nature. What's not appreciated by the Asian community is that the Conservatives respect the Asians tremendously. Asians get on with their lives. They are successful. They look after themselves."

Flather had previously been elected Mayor of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. Since the Church of England is the official church, she had two chaplains to advise her on matters concerning religion and conscience. Flather said, "They had no difficulty with a non-Christian mayor. As mayor, I participated in Anglican services by reading the 'lessons,' which are pieces from the Bible. A lot of people said I brought a completely new freshness to the readings."

While mayor, she began a multi-faith council in Maidenhead. "Those people willing to participate," she observed, "came with a mind to be united and not disunited. When you explain that it is not for the dilution of their faith, but a working together for the good of all, I think that people are really pleased about it."

Flather acknowledges the Hindu impact on parliament so far has been minimal. "The Muslims lobby hard in parliament," she noted by way of comparison, "and they are also connected with the evangelical Christian community. This is because some concerns, such as schools, are the same for both groups. The Hindus do not have a lobby. We haven't had issues which we can lobby. The Bhaktivedanta Manor temple issue is the first one we are lobbying. That is good because it shows our feelings. I have been involved in that. But you see, when we had that march to the parliament, not a single MP was available. They had all left. Our people have not made the march and their feelings sufficiently known to their own MPs, so they didn't stay. We don't understand how to use the system. I will give you another example. Someone very interested in Conservative politics put his name forward for a public appointment. And he put down me and Keith Vaz (a Labour MP) as his two referees. It is so naive to have two names from opposing parties. That means you belong nowhere. When you are on the fence, nobody cares about you. In politics you have to put your eggs in some basket."

Flather went on to comment on the Hindu council, recently formed to provide an effective political lobby. "They very kindly gave me the wrong address for the launch of the Council," she wryly observed. "So, I spent three hours looking for the place. I was very distressed by that. I was very, very angry about it. I don't mind if they are disorganized, but it was the height of casualness. I feel that the Asian organizations do not have a core of good management. There is no good time keeping. Everything is such a muddle. There is something we have to learn from this country. We will have to start to be a little more precise. The Jews are very good at organizing things."

She was much more critical of the ordinary Hindu's approach to individual politicians. "At the functions I have been to, our people treat their MPs as their gods," she said. "You know that they fuss around them. They lick their boots. It makes me quite sick. The MP needs you, your vote. You don't need the MP. The Hindus don't seem to understand that. This whole thing brings us back to the inferiority with the whites. You just watch the dynamics of the group. When the Asians are by themselves, they have a certain dynamic. When you introduce a white person into that group, the dynamic changes. Why? Are we not secure in our dynamic?"

"I want our younger generation to have an influence on British society," she asserted. "I don't want them to be separate. That is not to say they have to give up their identity, religion or values. In fact, their values are very much needed by the majority. Problem is that they don't practice their own values, not the real ones. It is the superficial social things which people hang on to-community pressure and this and that. That's all rubbish. The real values of the Hindus can stand up to anything, any pressure, any situation, anything. The foremost of those values is that you are open to other people's views and feelings. You accept that people have different religions, different situations. You respect that. Accept and respect, these are very human aspects of Hinduism."

"There is something we can learn from the British," Flather added. "You have to give some of your time for nothing. This is part of the British values. If you are successful, if you are not grubbing around for your food, then you give some part of your time to your community whether it is as a school governor or part of some kind of public body. If you don't learn to do that, you will never have a voice in the institutions. It is as simple as that."

Keith Vaz, a Catholic MP, has been a prominent voice in the support of Bhaktivedanta Manor. Last year he arranged for more than 100 signatures from MPs of all parties in support of the Hare Krishna's right to continue their religious activities in the Bhaktivedanta Manor. He also attended the public inquiry into the refusal of Hertsmere council to give planning permission to the Manor. In his appeal, he said, "The social principle is clear. We should have the unequivocal commitment to freedom of worship. The Hindu community has worshiped here peacefully for decades. The planning position is clear. The temple has purchased land for a new access road which would solve this entire problem." Vaz makes sure that the Hindus get good representation in the House of Parliament.

Conservative member Niraj Deva from Brentford, West London, has Hindu origins in Rajasthan, from where his forefathers hailed and eventually settled in Sri Lanka. Niraj Deva does not consider himself a Hindu and his indifference to the Hare Krishna temple issue is well known. He says, "Bhaktivedanta Manor issue is a pure local government issue and the result of two local councillors blocking the resolution of the matter." He feels that the central government should not interfere in this matter.

Bhaskar Ghorpade is a practicing Hindu barrister famous for the Rasa Nataraja case [retrieving a priceless temple statue from a museum] and introducing Hindu laws into the British legal system. He believes that because Hindus are not united, they do not appear to be effective as a strong voice in influencing decision makers. "The Hare Krishna issue has been able to bring Hindus together from time to time, but because of a lack of leadership and professionalism, this unity seems fragile." Bhaskar is at the moment working towards framing an organization of Indian professionals who will project a better image of our community. C.B. Patel may be one of the members of this organization. Patel helped the Labour Party to change its policy towards Kashmir and the role of Hindus in it.

Another lawyer turned lobbyist, G.D. Tandon, represents a number of NRIs and Hindu organizations in the UK. Shri Tandon is also well known for his astrological predictions. He is known to have advised John Major, the British prime minister, about his victory, in spite of all the opinion polls to the contrary. Tandon believes in the power of prayer which he learned from the Radha Soami Satsang, Dayal Bagh, Agra. Through this prayer, Tandon is known to have darshan of the Hindu Gods. Consequently Tandon is able to make accurate predictions and prophecies. He has consistently advocated that the rich give over ten percent of their wealth and income to assist with charitable works.

Virendra Sharma is the Mayor of Ealing. He has worked for the Labour party, but because of political rivalries and jealousies, he was not able to get a parliamentary candidature this year. He says, "Hindus are not strong because they do not try to unite the way Sikhs and Muslims do." In Southall, Virendra Sharma was voted down by his own Hindu Labour Party colleagues while the Sikh MP, Pyare Singh Khabra, was renominated. "After the Ayodhya Babri Masjid demolition, a Hindu temple in Southall was almost set on fire. No member of parliament raised his voice in condemnation," said Sharma. He made protests, but did not get much support from fellow Hindus.

Sharma fought for decades to establish a Vishwa Hindu Kendra in Southall. Recently Norma Major, wife of the prime minister, performed arati at this temple. Ironically for Sharma, she was promoting the Conservative Party. He is proud to have a Hindu heritage. "I come from a brahmin family which has survived conversions and attacks on the Hindu community since the time of Aurangzeb. I am in the Labour Party because I believe in the fundamental Hindu values of caring, sharing, compassion and tolerance."

Prem Sharma, known as a "kingmaker," enjoys the privilege of being a member of the Conservative Party executive committee and the chairman of the regional One Nation Forum. Dr. Sharma believes that Hindus in general tender a very good image in the Westminster Palace. "Most of the MPs believe that Hinduism is a religion of tolerance." They were concerned about the Babri Masjid demolition and its aftermath. He organized conferences in Parliament to debate "hot" issues such as Kashmir. In the presence of 90% Muslim audiences, the plight of those Hindus who were driven away from Kashmir was revealed. He has been able to recruit hundreds of Hindu members to the Conservative Party.

In the mainstream Conservative party members John Wheeler and Toby Jessel have expressed their sympathies for the Hindus.

Labour Party member Lord Meghnad Desai is a renowned professor at the London School of Economics. Though brought up in a Hindu family, he considers himself secular, and "not a Hindu." He rarely attends parliament.

There are other educated Hindus who impact the political process. Praveen Momin is an advisor to the Privy Council and most probably will get a Tory parliamentary ticket. Praveen celebrates all Hindu festivals with his parents, Italian wife Julia and his only child, Partha.

Katie Ghosh represents the Citizen Advisory Bureau in parliament. The Bureau is a kind of legal aid, where ordinary citizens can go with complaints. These in turn are taken to the parliament by Ghosh. She is enjoying an important platform to air grievances of ordinary citizens, especially Hindus, and to influence decision makers in parliament.

The most notorious Hindu woman in UK politics was indisputably Pamela Bordes. A parliamentary researcher, her seduction of a number of MPs in the mid-1980s led to the resignation of at least one government minister and occupied England's tabloids for an entire year.

The common observation of the politicians interviewed for this article is "lack of unity." The unity of the Jews and the other religions is created by their clergy banding together and guiding their people. The Hindu clergy-that is the swamis and saints-have not banded together and are in fact notoriously absent. Swamis are not looked up to in the same way as Catholic ministers or Jewish rabbis. In Buddhism the established clergy moves the religion forward, as do the Imams of Islam. The absence of clergy makes for fighting and bickering. In traditional Hinduism, there are ashrams. The heads of these monasteries oversee the temples and the society. They guide the politicians, just as the two Church of England ministers guided Shreela Flather when she was a mayor. In this way the politicians are reminded of dharma and the whole of society is kept on the right path.

Sri Rakesh Mathur was born in Allahabad, India. He has lived in Europe for the past 15 years and is engaged in making film documentaries on bilateral issues between Europe and India.

Sidebar: How Parliament Works

The parliament in the United Kingdom is comprised of the House of Commons with 651 elected members and the House of Lords with more than 1,200 members. In the House of Lords are 800 hereditary peers and 400 life peers. Twenty-six are bishops of the Church of England. Life peerages (such that of Shreela Flather) are usually granted in recognition of service to the country, or because one of the political parties wants the person in the House of Lords. They are unpaid except for some expenses.

As there are no legal restraints imposed by a written constitution (as in India and America), Parliament may, in theory, legislate as it pleases. It can make or change any law. In practice, members bear in mind the common law and normally act in accordance with precedence. The validity of an act of parliament, once passed, cannot be disputed in the courts. Since the beginning of this century,

effectively all legislative power lies with the House of Commons, and none with the House of Lords.