https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/what-happened-in-leicester-rashmee-roshan-lall/

**What happened in Leicester?**

A shocking outbreak of violence shows that a multicultural society is open to radical ideas from abroad



[**RASHMEE ROSHAN LALL**](https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/contributor/rashmee-roshan-lall)

It may be fortuitous that Britain’s first non-white prime minister, a practising Hindu of Indian origin, has a name that is Sanskrit for “sage”. Rishi Sunak will need all the sagacity he can muster to restore Britain’s sullied, post-Brexit reputation.

But Sunak’s rise coincides with new fault lines that have emerged in multicultural Britain. Leicester has a distinct ethnic profile. Nearly [one-third of its population](https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census/2011ukcensuses) has South Asian roots, and some of its main shopping districts are like the bazaars of the east, with sari emporiums, samosa vendors and shops selling 22-carat gold jewellery. For most of the past half-century, Leicester’s Christians, Muslims and Hindus – the city’s three largest faith groups, in that order – have lived happily side by side.

Events in September made clear that something has changed. Hindus and Muslims fought one another in the streets. At one point a group of 300 masked Hindu men marched through a predominantly Muslim area of Leicester. People attacked one another with sticks and bats, vandalised cars and religious sites. The police arrested over 50 people.

[Claudia Webbe](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/20/leicester-violence-could-spread-beyond-city-says-mp-claudia-webbe), the MP for Leicester East, has warned that the violence could foreshadow a “more nationwide issue”. Leicester’s mayor Peter Soulsby warned that the troubles were not about local matters so much as [“subcontinental politics](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/19/half-those-arrested-over-clashes-in-leicester-from-outside-county)”.

Enter Sunak, just weeks later. British-born-and-bred, he is a third-generation immigrant. A visually distinct ethnic minority, albeit from a comfortably middle class family, his political trajectory seems to symbolise the triumph of transnationalism and diversity. But obvious attempts are underway to tie Sunak to a quite different story, one that Avinash Paliwal, a lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies, recently said would “feed into the popular narrative of rising Indian — even Hindu — global power”.

Sunak is open about his Hindu faith. When he was sworn in as an MP, he took his oath on the Bhagavad Gita, the revered Hindu text, and when he was Boris Johnson’s Chancellor, he lit Diwali lamps on the doorstep of 11, Downing Street. Now that he is prime minister, politicians in India have welcomed his success, emphasising their cultural links to the new occupant of No.10. Priti Gandhi, a leading member of India’s ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), tweeted of her “great joy” at the success of a “proud Hindu who publicly acknowledges and respects his culture and roots.”

Paramjeet Singh, another BJP leader, told Deutsche Welle, “He may be British, but I am happy that he believes in such traditions and that makes us Hindus proud and happy.” It was left to India’s prime minister, Narendra Modi, to articulate a grand vision of a shared destiny. British Indians, Modi said in a congratulatory message for Sunak, are a “living bridge” between the two countries.

That emotive, even uplifting image, is soured somewhat by events that took place in Leicester. When the violence was over and the question arose of who was to blame, British community leaders across the religious spectrum – Hindu, Muslim, Christian – expressed deep concerns about baleful “outside” elements. That, it seems, was a euphemism for two faith-based political movements, which are gathering support across the Indian subcontinent.

The first of these is Hindutva, the muscular Hindu nationalist ideology associated with India’s governing BJP, which Prime Minister Modi has led to electoral victory in 2014 and 2019. The second is the broader global arc of militant Islamism, which resonates throughout South Asia.

Under the BJP, India – which is constitutionally secular – has steadily moved towards the idea of Hindu majoritarianism, a mindset that is of growing appeal to Indian expat communities in Britain, the United States, [Canada and Australia](https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/9/26/violent-hindu-extremism-is-now-a-global-problem). This is why events in Leicester are so significant. If a city that is [celebrated](https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/living-diversity/project-news/leicester) as the model of British multiculturalism is so divided, what happens to other towns, which are less well integrated? Take, for example, the town of Edison in New Jersey on America’s east coast. That small town – named after Thomas, the famous inventor – has roughly 110,000 residents and according to US Census data, nearly half identify as “Asian” – in this case, Hindus and Muslims from India. Each year, Edison holds a mid-August parade to mark India’s independence day. But this year’s parade [included a yellow bulldozer](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/bulldozer-among-floats-indian-parade-divides-new-jersey-town-2022-09-22/). That seemingly innocuous construction machine has become a divisive political symbol. It now represents the campaign, in several Indian states ruled by the BJP, to [bulldoze the homes of Muslims](https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20220615-we-are-homeless-now-bulldozers-raze-rights-of-india-s-muslims) who’ve been accused of crimes before the judicial process can take its course.

Edison’s bulldozer float carried pictures of the hardline Hindu monk who leads Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state, and who is synonymous with this brand of populist extrajudicial actions against Muslims. Edison’s Indian Muslims expressed “hurt” at seeing the bulldozer and regret that “hate [was] migrating from India to the United States”. The parade organiser apologised and promised never again to allow the “divisive” representation of “certain activities that have been happening in India.” This seemed to restore calm, and remind Edison’s populace that they live in New Jersey, not New Delhi.

But the narrative from Leicester is neither linear nor agreed, and the independent review ordered by Mayor Soulsby has already fallen at the first hurdle – securing both Hindu and Muslim buy-in. At the start of November, the review lead, Dr Chris Allen of the University of Leicester, [stepped down](https://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/news/leicester-news/chris-allen-out-inquiry-leicester-7768847) saying it would not be possible for him to conduct an impartial assessment “in the current climate”. Allen, a hate crimes expert, had been [criticised by several members of Leicester’s Hindu community](https://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/news/leicester-news/hindu-leaders-say-boycott-city-7753388) for his [expertise on Islamophobia](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Islamophobia-Chris-Allen/dp/0754651401).

It hasn’t helped that [the Indian](https://twitter.com/HCI_London/status/1571805409060462593?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1571805409060462593%7Ctwgr%5E403eab0d423ec6ac081d088796877df2a2458841%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fscroll.in%2Flatest%2F1033302%2Fleicester-unrest-uk-muslim-body-criticises-indian-high-commission-for-focussing-on-attacks-on-hindu) and [Pakistan](https://www.phclondon.org/pressrelease/on-situation-in-leicester) High Commissions weighed in early in the Leicester troubles, offering competing statements. India condemned the “violence perpetrated against the Indian community in Leicester and vandalisation of premises and symbols of [the] Hindu religion”. Pakistan, founded as a [homeland for South Asia’s Muslims](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-40961603), condemned “[the systematic campaign of violence](https://www.phclondon.org/pressrelease/on-situation-in-leicester) and intimidation that has been unleashed against the Muslims of the area”.

Residents I contacted offered varying explanations for the violence. Manzoor Moghal is the former chair of Leicestershire County Council’s Race Relations Committee as well as of the Federation of Muslim Organisations in Leicester. He says local high spirits got out of hand after an Asia Cup cricket match between India and Pakistan in Dubai. It was a tight game, which India won with only two balls to spare. India-Pakistan cricket matches always have a confrontational edge to them. But, according to Moghal, the sporting rivalry among Leicester’s cricket fans turned into something broader when sections of the Somali community joined in.

Some residents said the clashes had nothing to do with cricket, but were down to long-simmering communal tensions and social changes in a city that has had successive waves of immigration from different parts of the world. Other residents said that Leicester’s approximately 15 per cent Hindu population was becoming increasingly Islamophobic. There were parallel claims of harassment by Muslims who, at roughly 18 per cent, make up one of the city’s larger faith communities.

Faisal Hanif, who [analyses coverage of Muslims and Islam](https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/uk-leicester-riots-muslims-victims-media-allowed-are) for the Muslim Council of Britain’s Centre for Media Monitoring, and who lived in Leicester as a university student, told me “there is a contingent of people who have come into Leicester in recent years and brought in a Hindutva ideology”. A volunteer for Insight UK, which describes itself as “a social movement of the British Hindu and British Indian communities”, said the trouble was “the fault of Islamists, not Muslims, in Leicester and Hindus only marched in the peace protests”.

Some Leicester residents blamed “outsiders” for the violence. Romail Gulzar, a Pakistani Christian immigrant who serves as managing editor of the Leicester Times, a local news site, told me there was an influx from Birmingham, something [police confirmed in a statement](https://twitter.com/leicspolice/status/1571909548100947969).

For all the different views, there are two points of general agreement: that “fake news” on social media whipped up emotions; and that Leicester’s newest community – Portuguese-passport holders, mainly of the Hindu faith – are in the picture, either as partial instigators or hapless victims. A [new report by the think tank Henry Jackson Society](https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CRTLeicesterFinalReport-FINAL-VERSION.pdf)’s Centre on Radicalisation and Terrorism notes the “misinformation campaign” around the incidents in Leicester and that the conflict has “attracted attention from the sub-continent with nationalists in India and Pakistan spreading hate online.”

The report, titled ‘Hindu-Muslim civil unrest in Leicester: “Hindutva” and the creation of a false narrative’, also references the “relatively recent immigrant Hindu Diu Daman community in Leicester” and that many of them reportedly hold Portuguese citizenship. The report says that “Evidence points towards a particular community cohesion/ territorial issue” between these new immigrants and their Muslim neighbours in Leicester on account of the former’s alleged predilection to loud celebration of Hindu festivals.

The story of these Portuguese passport-holders underlines the long shadow still cast by European colonialism. The community originates from Daman and Diu, two former Portuguese colonies on India’s west coast, bordering the Indian state of Gujarat, which is prime minister Modi’s home turf. Historical links with Portugal meant some of the community were eligible for Portuguese passports. That EU citizenship allowed them to move into the UK before the 2016 Brexit vote.

Anecdotally, the Portuguese Hindus serve as unskilled workers, in Leicester’s garment and food production plants, and largely keep to themselves. The community is, allegedly, more in tune with the Hindutva sentiments of the Indian government. A prominent member of Leicester’s Hindu community told me that only “a few kids [from the Portuguese-Hindu community] caused trouble [that night in September] but it was nothing the police couldn’t have stopped.”

Even though the Portuguese Hindus’ role, if any, is unclear, an early arrest by the police during the violence was [Amos Noronha](https://www.leics.police.uk/news/leicestershire/news/2022/september/policing-operation-continues-in-east-leicester2/), a 20-year-old Leicester man with a surname that is common in the Indian state of Goa, also a former Portuguese colony. He was sentenced to 10 months in prison. A source who knows the Portuguese Hindu community well told me it is unfairly maligned for being new to Leicester and poorer than its long-settled Asian segments.

Dr Jivabhai Odedra, trustee of Leicester’s Shree Hindu Temple and Community Centre, took a philosophical view. “Every time people come from some part of the world, they bring their own culture,” he told me. “Eventually they will merge and they will learn about British country houses and Sunday lunch and the way we do things here.”

But Gurharpal Singh, an emeritus professor of Sikh and Punjab studies at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies and visiting fellow at the University at Leicester, was more cautious. “The BJP is popular with Leicester’s Hindu community,” he said, from his home in Leicester, where he has lived “off and on since 1964”. Singh noted “the increasing influence of homeland politics and the mobilisation of the diaspora by the BJP”, and said Leicester was showing the effects of great “social change on account of primary migration in the past decade”.

What emerges is a sense that the rivalry of the subcontinent’s nuclear-armed neighbours is being exported to the Midlands. Yasmin Surti, secretary of the Federation of Muslim Organisations in Leicester, told the [BBC’s File on 4](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001cpc9): “an extreme ideology is playing out from the Indian sub-continent and is starting to play out on our streets in Leicester and arguably the UK.” And Leicester city councillor Rita Patel agreed that “external forces are endangering our futures (and) not just in Leicester.”

It is of a piece with the warning issued by Hanif of the Muslim Council of Britain’s Centre for Media Monitoring. “The British media hasn’t quite grasped the danger of Hindutva ideology,” he said.

But Sanjay Gadhvi, who looks after community and inter-faith relations for the ISKCON Hare Krishna Temple in Watford, London, challenged this. “I notice the churning in the media, the use of the word ‘Hindutva’, the increased level of anti-India and anti-Hindu comment.” The Henry Jackson Society’s report says that “allegations of Hindutva extremism and RSS terrorism in the UK has resulted in incitements to violence and anti-Hindu hate online, vandalism of Hindu temples, and reports of assaults on the Hindu community and those who have professed support for the Hindu community.” The report said that it “does not and cannot, with current evidence to hand, assert there is no Hindu nationalist extremism in the UK but it evidences that those who organised the Hindu protests were not and are not as yet members of any extremist or terrorist organisation.”

Gadhvi stresses that “our primary objective is not to fight India’s battles here. We have a connection, but it is not political. This is our country and this is our home.”

Even so, Ali Amla, a British Gujarati Indian Muslim who works in conflict resolution and social cohesion for the educational charity Solutions not Sides, described Leicester’s new sectarianism as very old and depressingly familiar. “We’ve seen it in Northern Ireland, in the Balkans and in Gujarat [in the 2002 violence against Muslims]. In so many ways, Leicester’s problems are very international.”

The heightened connectivity of social, political and economic processes across borders is a welcome development of the past five decades. Leicester seems to embody a troubling transnationalism, one that imports partisan divides that have little to do with local or even national British politics. But Sunak’s rise is the flip side. Isn’t it?