

## NRIs and Blair: Curry and Custard

During the 10 years of Prime Minister Tony Blair's rule in Britain, NRIs never had it so good. Or did they? As Indians in Britain bid goodbye to Blair and get ready to welcome Gordon Brown, they take stock of the decade gone by and wonder how will they fare in future.

British Asians, indeed all Britons, had high hopes from Blair when he took charge. He promised to be different, to listen to people and to do his best to resolve problems. Has he delivered? He says he has but most Britons, many NRIs included, believe he has let them down.

Under Blair, the economy has grown with falling unemployment, low inflation and rising living standards. NRIs prospered in business and professions without political interference. Many moved up from their corner shops.

As the rich got richer, NRIs moved up among the richest in Britain. Lakshmi Mital tops them all in the 2007 Rich List followed by the Hinduja brothers, Sirichand and Gopichand, at number four. On the flip side, some rich NRIs were involved in the 'cash for honours' scandal that has hit Blair's and Labour's credibility.

Blair has been close to Indians, especially the Hindus and Sikhs. He visited temples, mosques and gurudwaras for goodwill and support. Diwali became a big festival in Britain and his wife Cherie donned a sari while attending some Hindu function.

But Muslims have been effectively isolated after 9/11 and 7/7 attacks. They protested with fellow Britons about Britain's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Muslims have been sometimes arrested on suspicion. They have protested against the government's unwarranted paranoia for the misdeeds of a few.

Blair said they were trying to fish out the terrorists. The British government supported religious based schools for Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims among others. Ironically, Muslim schools were closely observed by the security services, and female Muslim students stopped by courts from covering their faces.

'Blair's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan earned him a lot of critics at home. It proved to be his political nemesis,' said Shamlal Puri, an Indian in London. 'Every political leader likes to complete his term - so did Blair go voluntarily or was he pushed? A majority of Britons believe he was pushed out before his Labour Party could suffer further irreparable damage.'

Blair was with India on the economic front. He visited India more times than any British prime minister, promoting British investment in India. Anglo-Indian trade more than doubled and Britain sold arms to India, including Jaguar fighter planes. India has become the number 2 investor in Britain.

'Britain has always been a magnet for Indian immigrants and asylum seekers. The Blair Government has been fairly lenient in their immigration policies compared with the Conservatives who saw no compunction in using the race card to garner votes,' said another NRI.

Britain still remains a deeply racist society though Blair made an effort to foster race relations.

Britain's immigration laws are fairly relaxed, prompting allegations that the country was soft towards illegal immigrants.

Britain still suffers from the strains colour bar but there is nothing in the statute books that promotes this as a policy. There are allegations of institutional racism but this is more done on the basis of decisions made by people in power, not the government.

Blair and the Labour claim to be a tonic for Britain's National Health Service (NHS) employing thousands of Indian doctors and nurses. His critics claim NHS is clinically dead because he starved it of money. Many Indian doctors are contemplating leaving NHS to go into private practice or to leave Britain. Another disgruntled group of Indian doctors who never got a job with the NHS warn other doctors not to come and work for NHS.

'Under Labour or Tories, we're still struggling,' said Pratap Kapila, a social observer in Southall, 'Promotion becomes difficult and there is still lots of racism. Looking out of my window, I see two Polish labourers building a garage. They don't know how to build but they are allowed into Britain but not Indian masons who have built the entire Middle East.'

So, what's Blair's legacy?

Politically, he saved the monarchy after the death of Princess Diana and achieved the breakthrough in Ireland. But for NRIs, it's curry and custard.

What can be expected from new Prime Minister Gordon? Not much. After all, he worked with Blair. He may make some cosmetic changes but it may be old wine in a new bottle.

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