

4 “I am from Wolverhampton”

A. Read the text and compare the two characters' opinions about their culture.

B. Turn to **Worksheet n°11** for a detailed reading exercise.

C. Go further. What does this excerpt show about Indians' integration in Great Britain?

That afternoon, with my head throbbing, I didn't have the stamina for such a showdown so ended up hovering around the taxi rank, variously pretending I was waiting for someone, pretending I was taking vital phone calls, and trying to catch glimpses of drivers' faces without actually catching their eye, until I was certain my driver wasn't an uncle or a brother-in-law. He was, however, inevitably, a member of the world's fifth largest organised religion. Couldn't have been any more Sikh¹, in fact: pictures of all ten gurus sellotaped on to the dashboard: incense sticks dangling out of air vents; a pair of miniature boxing gloves bearing the Sikh khanda hanging from the driving mirror. Moreover, his turban was Khalistan orange, suggesting militancy. And if he was anything like my militant Sikh relatives who also drove taxis for a living, there was a possibility he was carrying a 'ceremonial' sword under his seat for protection, though I tried not to think about this as we pulled away, instead just tried to wallow² in the happy fact that he barely grunted in acknowledgement when I announced my destination. Sweet silence ...

... until the Ring Road, when he was suddenly overwhelmed by the loneliness of the short distance cab driver and the intercom sign flickered into life.

'SO WHERE YOU FROM THEN'

I dread this question in London cabs, because it usually means me replying: 'Wolverhampton'... and the London cabbie responding with: 'Ha. I mean. Where are you from originally?' I will then say: 'I'm originally from Wolverhampton.'

The cabbie will say: '—'

I will then say: 'You want to know which country my parents are from?'

The cabbie (usually pretty uninterested by now) will say: 'Yeah.'

'They are from the Punjab, in north India.'

'When did they come here?'

'Erm... dunno.'

'Why did they come here?'

'Dunno.'

The remainder of the journey invariably passing in awkward silence.

While the categories and vocabulary differ in Wolverhampton, I dread³ the conversation for the same reason: because the cabbie's aim is to pigeonhole⁴ and classify.

'I'M FROM LONDON.' I shouted back in bad Punjabi.

'Ki?'

I repeated myself, louder, more slowly, but in English.

'You don't speak Punjabi then?' he asked in Punjabi.

'Hahnji, I do,' I said in bad Punjabi. 'Just out of practice.'

The rear-view mirror framed only one eye but I could tell his glare was one of disdain. 'So where you from originally?' he continued in Punjabi. Regardless⁵.

'I am originally from Wolverhampton,' I said in bad Punjabi.

'I mean... which pind? Your father's village?'

I really should have known the answer to the question. The nature of Sikh migration from the Punjab into Britain — some villages were transposed, complete with their broiling caste strife, en masse — means I grew up hearing names of villages being bandied about. I even spent a fortnight at my father's home in India during one of my university holidays. But so intense was my boredom during this trip — my extended family's interest in me limited to asking how much I might earn on graduation, when I was going to get married and, in the case of my male cousins, whether English girls were easy — that I developed a mental block on the name.

'Can't remember,' I admitted eventually, in bad Punjabi.

The cabbie rolled his eyes. At least, he rolled the one eye I could see.

'I think my father's village is somewhere near Jalandhar,' I added, realizing as soon as I'd uttered the words that they were as helpful as saying a town was 'somewhere in the vicinity of London'.

The end of the cabbie's moustache twitched⁶. I knew what he was thinking: idiot bilayati, doesn't know anything about his own culture. I glowered back in a way that intended to convey: you're in England now, make some kind of effort to learn the language of your new home — before developing a sudden and keen interest in the view from the window. We were travelling down from the town centre to my parent's suburb in the south of the town via the Dudle Road, a corridor lined with Indian doctors' surgeries, Indian sweet shops, two Sikh temples — one for the Jat (farmer) caste I belong to, the other for those of the Chamar caste — Indian supermarkets, Indian barber shops, Indian insurance brokers and Indian jewellery shops. You could, if you lived here, never deal with anyone who wasn't Indian. And my parents rarely do.

1 monotheistic religion from the Punjab region • 2 s'apitoyer • 3 redouter • 4 cataloguer • 5 sans s'en soucier • 6 tressaillir

The Boy with the Topknot
Sathnam Sanghera, 2009

