

# Gujurati migrants' search for modernity in Britain

Emma Crewe and Uma Kothari

*In this article we consider international migration by drawing on the life stories of Gujaratis presently living in Wellingborough, to illustrate the varied and complex reasons for migration, and the contrasting experiences of men and women migrants.*

*'If people stay in one place there is no progress'*

The stories were collected as part of a research project which was a response to some puzzling findings which emerged during earlier research by Uma Kothari in India in 1986–88. Despite their prosperity, farming households had family members living abroad either in the UK or East Africa, and those remaining had submitted visa applications and were waiting to migrate to Britain. Many of them had family and friends in Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, and were planning to join them. Why did an upwardly mobile group of people who were becoming such important and powerful actors in the South Gujarat agricultural scene choose to move to Britain where, like their family and friends before them, they would probably live in less favourable conditions?

This article asserts that many people from formerly-colonialised countries have migrated to Britain because they hoped that they would find a modern, civilised, and progressive place to live. For most, this search for 'modernity' in Britain has proved to be fruitless. In general, racism and unemployment, and perceptions

of immorality and bad manners, have shattered their illusion of modernity in Britain. When Gandhi visited Britain and a journalist asked him what he thought of modern civilisation, he replied 'that would be a good idea'.

## Understanding the complex causes of migration

Much migration and development studies literature has a preoccupation with the economic causes of migration. However, reasons for migration are in fact complex, and varied; many are non-economic (see Cohen 1997). This article challenges explanations that reduce reasons for migration to one cause, for example acquiring employment and wealth, and builds on discussions about migration, culture and identity (Hall 1992, Gilroy 1993). Instead of choosing between accounts which focus on individual motivation for migration, or explanations that look at global economics but ignore individuals, our research looked at migration from both micro- and macro-levels.

Following an introduction to the informants and the research methodologies, we examine the history of Gujarati migration

to Britain, the experience and impact of moving and, finally, suggest how these issues are highly relevant to international development.

In this article we use a gender analysis as an essential tool for understanding migration processes. Relations between women and men shape and are shaped by migration (Wright 1995, Chant 1992). Until the mid-1970s, women were invisible in studies of migrancy, and when they did emerge tended to do so within the category of dependents of men, as Buijs (1993) argues. Much of the gender and migration literature concentrates on labour migration and labour markets or the distinct realm of employment in which men and women become involved following migration (Rowbotham and Mitter 1994). But we aim to go beyond a consideration of women's and men's different patterns of migration, to investigate individual women's and men's experiences of migration and the ways in which gender relations have been recreated and changed within and outside the household (see also Westwood 1988, 1995).

### **Methodology**

From 1996–7, we interviewed Gujarati migrants in the town of Wellingborough. The most recent census tells us that the Wellingborough Gujarati community consists of approximately 2,300 people: just under 3 per cent of the population. The research was based on qualitative research methods; we collected people's life histories in semi-structured interviews at home, in their workplace, in community centres, shops, factories, and temple; or during community or religious meetings, events, and festivals. We also held a reminiscence group for elderly women living in sheltered housing. Finally we interviewed Pakistani, Afro-Caribbean, and white employers and community workers, and white residents living within a predominantly Gujarati residential area.

While people's descriptions of practices within the community could be analysed alongside the researchers' observation of those practices, interpreting the histories of

migration was more complex. Life histories are objects of study in themselves rather than accounts of a progression of real events. They reveal as much about the present, the tellers, and listeners, as they do about the past.

When asking why they chose to migrate from one place to another, it became plain that people's memories were highly selective. Interpreting people's migration stories proved to be a process of analysing how memory is shaped by present social and cultural influences, as much as piecing together macro and micro factors affecting migration patterns. Similarly, when exploring who made decisions about migration, it was found that contradictions emerged within households. Claims about who made decisions appeared to reveal more about how power relationships are contested than how decisions were made in reality. For instance, the gendered nature of both collecting and interpreting life stories became obvious. Not only were experiences often divergent for women and men, but the revelations about their past were expressed very differently. Men tended to be less confiding and expose fewer emotional vulnerabilities than women, despite the stress they also experienced as migrants.

Another significant aspect of the methodology relates to the researchers' responsibility towards people who tell their stories. Throughout the research we wrote about it in community newspapers which are sent to every Gujarati household in Wellingborough. We also presented our findings in a booklet and a photographic exhibition for the Gujarati community.

### **Migration history of the Gujarati community**

*Migration to Africa began in ancient times when 400 girls from Gujarat were captured for the slave trade by Arab pirates. They were rescued but their families refused to take them back, so they were taken to Ethiopia. There the king found them 400 good Ethiopian boys to marry who allowed their wives to keep their own culture. Today, if you go to that place you will find the girls look like Indians. They are so beautiful that when any man sees them he feels that he will have to leave his wife immediately.*



Above Arriving at Heathrow from Kenya in 1969

This is, according to a Gujarati teacher living in Wellingborough, how migration from India to Africa began. It reminds us that, for Gujarati women who, unlike men, nearly always move residence on marriage, migration from their parents' home is inevitable. The story also draws attention to the fact that if women's reputations are ruined, they can be forced into exile. Restriction on their mobility before marriage protects their own and their family's reputation, which is necessary not only for their own marriage prospects but those of other family members as well. It is already clear that gendered cultural rules and practices very directly shape migration.

Most Wellingborough Gujarati migrants are 'twice migrants' internationally, having first moved to East Africa after 1920 and then to Britain. Others moved directly from India to Britain from the middle of the 1950s. Initially, male migrants travelled on their own and returned to India every few years to visit

their family. It was men who sought employment while most women were not expected to find paid work in the public domain, and it was entirely appropriate for young men to set up a new residence on their own. There were, however, two women migrants who moved to Wellingborough independently. It is revealing that they had a history of refusing to conform to rules, both had left their husbands and, arguably, their reputations were already damaged by divorce.

Once financial security had been established, and residence in East Africa was seen as more permanent, women joined their husbands. The children of first generation East African Gujaratis often returned to India for education, more often than not with their mother accompanying them. During the Second World War, however, when it was virtually impossible to travel, children began to be educated through to secondary level in East Africa, and marriages were also arranged

there, provided that a spouse of the right caste could be found (Dwyer 1994:180).

Gujarati migration from East Africa to Britain, mostly soon after African countries gained independence, varied quite considerably. Those who were forcibly exiled from Uganda by Amin in 1972 left in family groups. Those who had more time to plan, for example Kenya Gujaratis who knew in 1963 that they had to leave or take Kenyan citizenship within five years, often sent someone ahead to assess prospects in Britain. Irrespective of age, these 'scouts' were always male.

### *Agency and migration*

Women are often represented as passive actors in migration, moving primarily at the command of a male member of the household. Either their motivation is not explored, or it is often supposed to be identical to that of their father or husband. Plainly, as Guy argues, some agents have more capacity than others to shape the process of migration (as cited by Wright 1995:781), but they are not always male. While it is true that the majority of Gujarati women we spoke to had migrated initially on marriage, it should not be assumed that migration is driven by men. First, to choose or agree to marry someone who has migrated is an affirmative decision, as decisive as choosing to move for any other reason. Furthermore, mothers and other female relatives were often involved in finding marriage partners.

Secondly, after marriage, twice- and thrice-migrant women often had an important role in deciding where to live. Some women we met claimed that they were the key decision-maker in deciding to move from one place to another. One Ugandan-born woman, for example, was so adamant that she did not want to live with her in-laws in Nairobi that she travelled to Kampala and remained in her parents' house until her husband was forced to join her. Many older men told us that they would like to return to India after retirement, but gave in to the wish of their wives to remain in Wellingborough to be near their children. Motivation in migration should not,

therefore, be associated only with men, because women can sometimes lead decision-making, and men and women may give different rationales for moving and for choosing one place rather than another.

Although a gendered perspective on migration is essential to understand the processes involved, the choices made by men and women also highlight certain patterns in common. Male and female life histories make it clear that individual material gain is an insufficient explanation for migration. For a great number of people, migration was involuntary (see also Cohen 1997). Those leaving East Africa were often compelled to migrate as a result of government policies. Others were under pressure if not compulsion. For example, men and women in India were persuaded to seek their fortunes or a good match in another country for the benefit of the family they were leaving behind. Thus, when there was a materially-based aspiration to this, it was meeting the interests of a much wider group than the individual.

Explanations for moving often called upon ideas about modernity; some said that they were hoping to 'progress' in a general rather than purely material sense. One Gujarati man was persuaded to move by his uncle who said 'if people stay in one place there is no progress.' Many women and men came to Britain, in particular, because they had high hopes of finding a modern, clean, 'civilised' country with high morals and plenty of opportunities. This is partly because 'ideas about Britain were largely derived from a colonial education system in which Britain was revered as the 'mother country' (Fryer 1984:374); and partly because relatives and friends depicted their experiences in Britain as more positive than they really were.

Many people spoke about the excitement of travel. As one informant put it 'Gujaratis have it in their blood to be enterprising, to migrate and to have a sense of adventure.' The idea of adventure, usually reserved for romantic tales about European explorers, plays a part in the story of Gujarati migration even if it is difficult to define.

## The realities of living and working in 'modernity'

While some Gujaratis in Wellingborough are entirely satisfied with their life, the majority of women and men said that they were, on the whole, disappointed. Memories of East Africa focus on the time for leisure, the beautiful places and climate, and the active socialising and support between households; life in Britain, in contrast, is characterised as difficult. Many are saddened, for example, by its lack of zest. One man relates:

*I spent my first night in a London hotel. When I looked out of the window at my usual rising time of 6 o'clock it was dark and deserted. In Tanzania it would be brightness and bustle at dawn so I assumed my watch was wrong and slept right through the morning. Then at last I realised that the liveliness I was waiting for would never appear.*

The disillusionment for women and men tended to be different. Many women entered paid employment in Britain for the first time, mostly working in factories. Since their menfolk tend to be located in similarly disadvantaged positions, the income migrant women bring into the family often spells the difference between poverty and a fairly reasonable standard of living (Warrier 1988:134). Migrant women are still seen to be a cheap and flexible source of labour, and they continue to be over-represented in jobs that are characterised by low pay, low status, and little opportunity for advancement (Westwood 1988). Westwood has pointed out that when Gujarati women became wage earners it was, however, 'largely an extension of familial roles rather than a source of independence for women' (1988:120). Factory work meant no reduction in other household roles, such as childcare, supporting other households, and contributing to community projects (such as fundraising for Wellingborough's Hindu temple which was built in 1981).

Men had higher expectations than women of employment. Many were well-qualified when they arrived in Britain, but were discriminated against when looking for work and

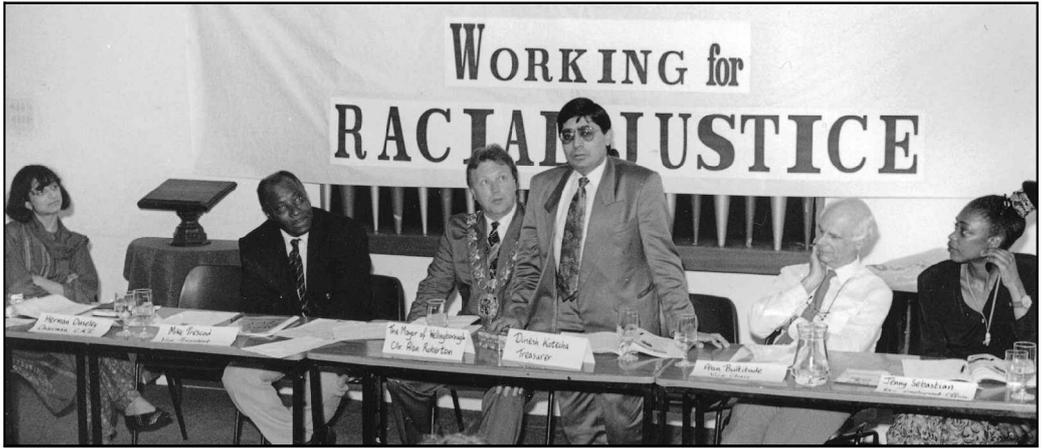
often failed to find employment appropriate to their qualifications and experience. In East Africa, in particular, many had had experience of managing people within the civil services, running small businesses or working for larger companies. When they could not find appropriate work in Britain, they often took factory jobs or remained unemployed. Although a large proportion, relative to the rest of Wellingborough's population, started businesses, many did so reluctantly and found running a small enterprise a struggle. As newspapers and almost all food products became available in supermarkets, many Gujarati-run businesses folded during the 1980s. Those that have survived depend on unpaid labour of other family members and chronic overwork on the part of all those involved. Men may have established most businesses in Wellingborough but, contrary to Westwood's findings (1988:121), their wives have often managed them because it would be too risky for both to give up paid employment.

### Isolation and conflict

Contrary to the stereotype of harmonious, intensely supportive Asian 'communities', women often feel isolated and do not know who to turn to when suffering stress: One woman reported:

*It looks rosy on the outside, but it's not always on the inside. It is difficult to get women to talk about their problems, they are in a trap. Some women get bullied and feel really isolated. Friends often do not want to get involved, and anyway they might gossip.*

Women and men Gujaratis also relate to white people and other Gujaratis in Britain in different ways. Generational issues are as relevant as those of gender. For example, young women have greater restrictions on their behaviour imposed by their own relatives. Second-generation women are still custodians of moral values, and have to try to resolve tensions caused by different expectations. Peers from school or college want them to participate in youth culture by, for example, drinking and going to clubs. Parents, who often see white British culture as immoral and corrupting, try to constrain them and, in



**Above** A meeting at the Victoria Centre in Wellingborough to mark the anniversary of the founding of the Racial Equality Council

particular, regulate contact between young men and women. Young people employ brave and ingenious strategies to subvert their parents' aims, as one young woman relates:

*...the daughter will have promised to come back at 11 pm and then does not go home until 2 am. She faces her parents, she waits while they tell her off, and then it is all over. It was still worth lying in order to be able to go out... There are restrictions on clothes too. You can't expose your body, especially not your legs — but trousers are OK. If you do people say 'she's got no shame'. I would not wear a shoulder strap dress in front of my father, but I might go out with one under a shirt which covered everything and then expose the straps when I got to the club.*

Young men are subjected to more physical racist violence than either older men or women. In common with other studies, we also found that while men expressed feelings related to unemployment, racism, and boredom (see Beliappa 1991), women's health problems were associated with isolation and conflicting expectations (see Fenton and Sadiq 1991).

#### **Service provision for migrant communities**

Mainstream services offer no appropriate, accessible and confidential way of helping either women or men with these problems. White-run statutory and voluntary organisa-

tions are failing in many other ways as well. In theory, all public services in Wellingborough are for the benefit of the whole population of the town including Black (Asian and Afro-Caribbean) people. Statutory authorities have tended to argue that the same needs exist within each community, and that all minorities should assimilate by using the same services as everyone else. But as one Gujarati commented, integration is not possible unless people are treated as equals. In practice, most government and voluntary agencies have been unable to ensure equality of access because their services are often inappropriate, hostile, and racist. As a result, members of Black communities are under represented as users of health and social care services (Wright 1993).

Given the shortage of opportunities in Wellingborough, many young people are moving to larger cities. Some Wellingborough Gujaratis have moved on to the USA or plan to do so in the future, and at least one has moved to India.

## **Conclusions: inequality and modernity**

An explanation of migration is needed that integrates a gendered perspective, pays attention to political, economic, cultural and ideological factors, and places social

processes within a historical and geographical context. Among Gujaratis in Northamptonshire, many different ideas had played a part in the decision to migrate, including ideas about how countries should modernise in imitation of the West,<sup>1</sup> images of 'home' versus the potentially utopian unknown lands, compulsion through family conflict, pressure from relatives, and government policy. In this list, culture and ideology are as significant as political and economic processes.

We have argued that a gender perspective illuminates our understanding of migration. The conditions, experiences, and impact of migration are inevitably gendered, in addition to being shaped by, for example, class, age, and caste. Since women's role in migration cannot be merely treated as an adjunct to men's, explanations that ignore the micro level (including gender relations) are insufficient.

Although gender relations shape and are shaped by migration, which inevitably leads to a complex explanation of processes, this does not mean we should retreat into an endlessly fractured and fragmented post-modern maze. Women and men may also share some motives and experiences of migration in common: for example, many have been searching for modernity in the context of colonialism, post-colonialism, and globalisation. The experience of Britain for the majority in Wellingborough has been disillusioning, and governmental, voluntary and 'community' support structures are inadequate. While Black community organisations require more resources to be effective, statutory agencies need to completely transform their policies and practices.

In particular, statutory agencies might, firstly, abandon the assumption that 'ethnic' minorities should assimilate. Critics have attacked this idea for decades, for example on the grounds that there is no unitary British culture to assimilate to, but the idea continues to thrive. Secondly, they need to recognise that different priorities, knowledge systems, cultural practices, and social inequalities exist between and within groups. Thirdly, they could improve accessibility to support services by, for example, making service counters more

welcoming so that all client groups are encouraged to use them. Fourthly, agencies need to take responsibility for combating racism, particularly at work, in public and private spaces, in education, and within the statutory agencies themselves. Statutory agencies need to acknowledge the problem of racism and work with Black groups to find appropriate solutions.

Some of these suggestions apply to agencies working in international development as well. There is an eerie silence about racism, for example, which urgently needs to be broken. Also, since their experience of Britain points to chronic social, economic and political problems within the country, the assumption that 'West is Best' should presumably be challenged. As Rattansi and Westwood point out 'Western modernity, however impressive its achievements, not only is incapable of providing solutions to basic problems of war and violence, environmental damage, economic exploitation, bureaucratic management and corruption, and equitable material comfort and security at national and global levels, but also chronically generates them as an almost inseparable part of its mode of operation' (1994:3).

Since the 1940s development practitioners from Britain have been travelling to so-called 'developing' countries to bring about modernisation through technology transfer, economic growth, and improved management (Crewe and Harrison, forthcoming). The idea of modernity embodies an irony which appears to have escaped the notice of many working in international development. We argue that development practitioners have much to learn from British Black people's experiences.

*Emma Crewe is a researcher in the Department of Anthropology at University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, emma@crewster.demon.co.uk*

*Uma Kothari is a lecturer and researcher in development studies at the Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester, Crawford House, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9GH. uma.kothari@man.ac.uk*

## Notes

- 1 We do not intend to emphasise the search for modernity above material factors as causes of migration.

## References

- Back, L (1996) *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racism and Multiculture in Young Lives*, London: University College.
- Bhachu, P (1993) 'Identities constructed and reconstructed: representations of Asian women in Britain', In (ed) G Buijs, *Migrant Women: Crossing Boundaries and Changing Identities*, Oxford: Berg.
- Beliappa, K (1991) *Illness or Distress? Alternative Models of Mental Health*, London: Confederation of Indian Organisations.
- Breman, J (1985) *Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Buijs, G (ed) (1993) *Migrant Women: Crossing Boundaries and Changing Identities*, Oxford: Berg.
- Chant, C (1992) *Gender and Migration in Developing Countries*, London: Belhaven
- Cohen, R (1997) *Global Diasporas*, London: University College.
- Crewe, E and Harrison, E (forthcoming) *Whose Development? An Ethnography of Aid*, London: Zed.
- Dwyer, R (1994) 'Caste, religion, and sect in Gujarat: followers of Vallabhacharya and Swaminarayan', in (ed) R Ballard, *Desh Pardesh: The South Asian presence in Britain*, London: Hurst and Company.
- Fenton, S and Sadiq, A (1991) *Asian Women and Depression*, London: Commission for Racial Equality.
- Fryer, P (1984) *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, London: Pluto.
- Gilroy, P (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso.
- Hall, S (1992) 'The question of cultural identity', in (eds) S Hall, D Held and T McGrew, *Modernity and its Futures*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- King, R (1995) 'Migrations, globalisations and place', in (eds) D Massey and P Jess, *A Place in the World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kothari, U (1997) 'Women's paid domestic work and rural transformation in India', in *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. XXXII, No. 17, 1997
- Potts, L (1990) *The World Labour Market: A History of Migration*, London: Zed
- Rattansi, A and Westwood, S (1994) *Racism, Modernity and Identity: On the Western Front*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Rowbotham, S and Mitter, S (eds) (1994) *Dignity and Daily Bread: New Forms of Economic Organising Among Poor Women in the Third World and the First*, London: Routledge.
- Skeldon, R (1990) *Population Mobility in Developing Countries*, London: Belhaven.
- Warrier, S (1988) 'Marriage, maternity, and female economic activity: Gujarati mothers in Britain', in S Westwood and P Bhachu, *Enterprising Women: Ethnicity, Economy, and Gender Relations*, London: Routledge.
- Warrier, S (1994) 'Gujarati Prajapatis in London: family roles and sociability networks', in (ed) R Ballard, *Desh Pardesh: the South Asian presence in Britain*, London: Hurst.
- Weiner, M (1990) 'Immigration: perspective from receiving countries', *Third World Quarterly*, 12(1), January 1990.
- Westwood, S (1988) 'Workers and wives: continuities and discontinuities in the lives of Gujarati women', in S Westwood and P Bhachu, *Enterprising Women: Ethnicity, Economy, and Gender Relations*, London: Routledge.
- Westwood, S (1995) 'Gendering diaspora: space, politics, and South Asian masculinities in Britain', in (ed) V van der Veer, *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Wright, C (1995) 'Gender awareness in migration theory: synthesising actor and structure in Southern Africa', in *Development and Change*, Volume 26 Number 4, October 1995.
- Wright, R (1993) *Care in the Community: How it Affects Black Communities in Northamptonshire*, Social Services Issues Group.