

BOOK REVIEW

Migrant Architects of the NHS: South Asian doctors and the reinvention of British general practice (1940s-1980s) by *Julian M. Simpson*

Hardcover, 336 pages
Manchester University Press
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This book is fundamental to understanding how and why, in the first few decades of the NHS, South Asian doctors accounted for up to half of the GP workforce in some of the most industrial and deprived areas of the UK. At a time when trained doctors were in short supply, a dismantled Empire provided a workforce and discrimination ensured its members funnelled down to unpopular parts of the profession such as general practice and to underprivileged parts of the country.

With a background of experience through the BBC World Service and a mission to encourage diverse interpretations of history, Julian Simpson, a new generation historian, has produced an insightful, evidence-based narrative of the “after effects” of Empire and how Britain’s Imperial past and South Asian migrants influenced modern Britain. It is surprising, given the scale of migration and its national significance, that it has not consistently been a part of the history of the NHS, and this work provides an eye-opening addition to a field in which little research has been carried out.

The book is divided into three parts, starting with the last days of Empire and Britain’s post-war healthcare desires, before moving on to the establishment of the NHS, and finally discussing the reinvention of general practice. What materialised was largely “extra pairs of hands” who conveniently slipped into an unplanned and underfunded general practice and so averted a major NHS staffing crisis. The main section focuses on core archival material, photographs and 45 distinct stories of migrants’ personal aspirations, ambitions and struggles. Their arrival was met with adverse responses from the medical profession, but wide social acceptance within the communities they settled into. A comprehensive bibliography is provided, encompassing memoirs, parliamentary records, official publications and other works.

With ambitions to become pioneering cardiothoracic surgeons, hospital physicians and obstetricians, none of those interviewed specifically entered Britain to become a GP. There are some evidently noteworthy champions revealed: Harbans Lal Gulati who campaigned for the vulnerable elderly during rationing after the Second World War, anti-racist activist Dipak Ray, the academic and broadcaster Shiv Pandey, and many more. Insights into the foundations of the Overseas Doctors’ Association, the building of new innovative surgeries, entrepreneur GPs, personal biases and internal community struggles are integrated into the bigger picture of how primary care came to be what it is.

Highly recommended, Simpson’s book raises important questions about the gap between the aspirations of the medical profession, the needs of the NHS, and the readiness of the government to invest in it.

Anjna Harrar
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