

6 Indians Who Helped Make London The City It Is Today

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Arup K Chatterjee, author of Indians in London, tells us about the Indian people who came to London and changed it — as well as Britain and the world — for good.



Mohandas K Gandhi became quite a celebrity in London. Image: public domain

My book is a five-act tale of 400 years of Indian migrations and settlements in London, since the age of Elizabeth I to the time of Elizabeth II. It tells the story of over 100 Indians who stayed in, settled in or visited London during this period. It is nearly impossible to condense the *dramatis personae* into a handful of characters. Nonetheless, this is a relatively indicative list of Indians who contributed to making London what it is today.

One of the First Indians in London: 'Peter Pope'



St Dionis Backchurch in the City of London (no longer here), where the first Indian is thought to have been baptised in Britain. Image: public domain

The arrival of the first Indian boy in London, in 1614, caused quite a stir, with 'children staring at him open-jawed'. The boy had been brought here by Patrick Copland, a chaplain in the East India Company, who had taught him to read and write in English, in the hope he'd spread Christianity among his fellow Indians.

The Bengali boy was the first known Indian to be baptised in Britain; it took place on 22 December 1616 at St Dionis, Fenchurch Street at Aldgate. It was a grand occasion; attended by members of the Privy Council, the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and the members

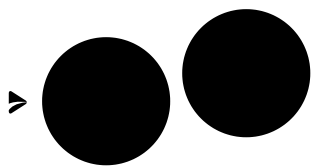
of the East India Virginia Companies. The rite was administered by Dr John Wood, and Petrus Papa, or 'Peter Pope', the name given in baptism, was chosen by King James.

Entrepreneur extraordinaire: Sake Dean Mahomed



Sake Dean Mahomed, who, among many accolades, was a royal 'shampooing surgeon'. Image: public domain.

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Mahomed was the author of the *Travels of Dean Mahomed: A Native of Patna in Bengal* (1794), the first known English book written by an Indian, and *The Benefits of Shampooing* (1822). In 1809, he founded the first Indian restaurant in Britain, the Hindoostane Coffee House at Portman Square, London. Then, in 1814, he and his wife, Jane Mahomed, established the first commercial shampooing bath in England, in Brighton. Besides curry and hookah, Mahomed popularised Indian medicated vapour baths in Britain, giving "a cure to many diseases and giving full relief when every thing fails". He was also shampooing surgeon to Kings George IV and William IV — that's quite the title.

First Indian MP in Britain: Dadabhai Naoroji



Dadabhai Naoroji on an Indian postage stamp. Image: public domain

Indian businessman, politician, member of the British Liberal Party and founding member of the Indian National Congress is a strong portfolio already. Dadabhai Naoroji was also the First Indian Member of the British Parliament — voted into the parliamentary constituency of Finsbury Central in 1892. As a Zoroastrian, he refused to take his oath on the Bible, instead sworn in on his copy of the Khordeh Avesta. Also known as the 'Grand Old Man of India', Naoroji wrote the book *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901), and proposed the drain of wealth theory, which described the devastating economic impact of British rule in India.

Placard-wielding princess: Sophia D Singh



Princess Sophia Dhuleep Singh selling "The Suffragette" outside Hampton Court Palace, where she has a suite of apartments.

Sophia Duleep Singh selling subscriptions for the Suffragette newspaper outside Hampton Court in April 1913. Image: public domain.

Daughter of Duleep Singh (the last Maharaja of Punjab) and Mamba Muller, Princess Sophia D Singh's godmother was Queen Victoria. Still, she was unafraid to speak for the everywoman. As a suffragette and leader of the Women's Tax Resistance League and the Women's Social and Political Union, Singh famously obstructed prime minister H.H. Asquith's car by holding a placard that read 'Give women the vote!'.

During the first world war, she helped Indian soldiers and lascar groups, leading a 10,000-woman protest rally to campaign for women's inclusion in the war effort. She also worked as a British Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse in Isleworth, tending to wounded soldiers.

Women's rights hero and social activist: Cornelia Sorabji



Cornelia Sorabji's bust in Lincoln's Inn. Image: [Jamesfranklingresham](#) in Creative Commons.

Bombay University's first female graduate and Oxford University's first female lawyer, Cornelia Sorabji became a social activist, women's rights campaigner and journalist. When she moved to London, Sorabji stayed with Elizabeth Adelaide Manning, Secretary of the National Indian Association. Sorabji was also closely associated with the National Council for Women in India, the Federation of University Women and the Bengal League

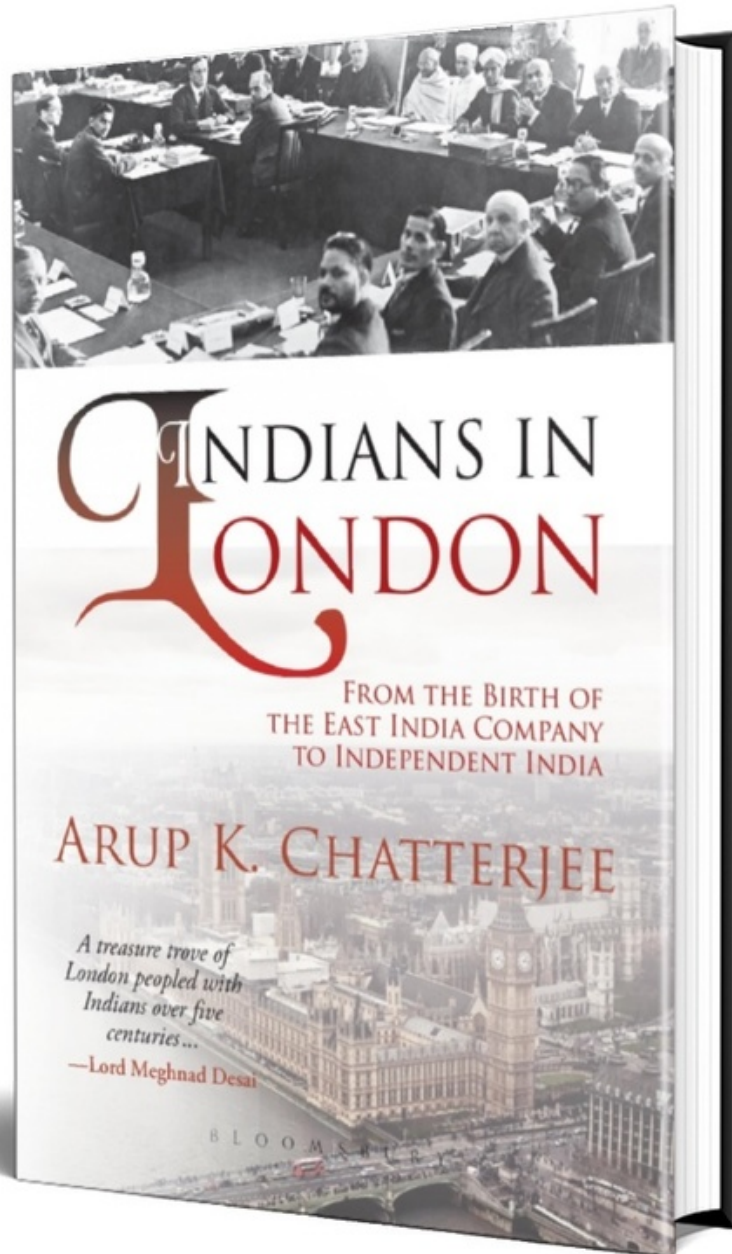
of Social Service for Women. In 1922, Sorabji became a member of Lincoln's Inn, where she's now commemorated with a bust. Her work was dedicated to the plight of Indian 'purdahnashins' (secluded women). Sorabji was also an influential author and wrote many books while in London, including *Love and Life beyond the Purdah* (1901), *Sun-Babies* (1904) and *Between the Twilights: Being studies of India women by one of themselves* (1908) — as well as autobiographical books *India Calling: The Memories of Cornelia Sorabji* (1934) and *India Recalled* (1936).

World-changing vegetarian: Mohandas K Gandhi



The statue of Gandhi in Tavistock Square, central London. Image: [Tim Tregenza](#) in Creative Commons

Gandhi lived in London for three years, attending lectures at University College London, then studying at Inner Temple to become a barrister. He hated the 'bland' British food, but his culinary life was changed when he discovered a vegetarian restaurant in Farringdon Street called the 'Central', and later became an executive committee member of the London Vegetarian Society. But he was a thorn in the British government's side, organising the Salt Satyagraha (Salt March) in 1930 — a peaceful protest against a law forcing Indians to buy British salt. He was also, of course, a voice for Indian independence. He was hailed as India's 'Father of the Nation,' first by Subhas Chandra Bose in 1944, and is celebrated today in statues in London's Parliament Square and Russell Square.



Indians in London: From the Birth of the East India Company to Independent India by Arup K Chatterjee, published by Bloomsbury India is available to buy now.