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Conservative Peer

Lord Sheikh's study of the first four British MPs of Indian descent is written with vigour and clarity

An Indian in the House

The Lives and Times of the Four Trailblazers who first brought India to the British Parliament

By **Mohamed Sheikh**
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Mohamed Sheikh, an active Conservative peer for 14 years, is a man with wide business and philanthropic interests. This is his second book. The first provided a vivid account of the life of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) who won the respect of the British in India for his skill in holding together a mighty Sikh empire. It collapsed after his death. His son, Duleep Singh, exiled in England, joined the Carlton Club and tried unsuccessfully in 1874 to become the Tory candidate in Whitby, where one of Gladstone's sons was MP.

Lord Sheikh has now turned his attention to the first four Indians to enter Parliament. The author has done a great service by bringing together short biographies of them in a single volume, written with vigour and clarity.

The first two, Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917) and Sir Mancherjee Bhownaggee (1851-1933) felt considerable respect for each other, while making their mark in opposing political parties. Both were prominent,

intellectually accomplished Parsis who divided their time between Britain and India.

Both were elected for inner London working-class seats in the 1890s. Naoroji won Finsbury Central as a Liberal, whose radical programme included home rule for India, by just

fleeing Jewish pogroms, had created much tension in the area. Bhownaggee played the anti-immigration card quite blatantly but proved a faithful, energetic constituency MP, holding the seat until 1906.

Trafalgar Square, London
Shapurji Saklatvala addresses the Six Processions meeting on "Unemployment Sunday"



“Saklatvala was an eloquent Communist firebrand who frequently caused uproar in the Commons”

The third Indian MP, Shapurji Saklatvala (1874-1936) was also a Parsi. He too won an inner London seat, Battersea North, but differed from his predecessors in almost every other respect. He

three votes (subsequently increased to five) in 1892.

Naoroji did not survive the next election in 1895 which brought Bhownaggee, a successful barrister, into the Commons as the first (and only) Tory MP for Bethnal Green North East, one of the capital's worst slum areas, with a majority of 160. An influx of East Europeans, some

was an eloquent Communist firebrand who proclaimed that “we must have uniform standards for all the workers all over Europe and Asia”. He frequently caused uproar in the Commons, of which he was a member between 1922 and 1929, with a short gap in 1923-4, under the watchful eye of M15.

Moderation was embodied in the last member of the quartet, Lord Sinha, of Raipur in the Presidency of Bengal (1863-1928). A quite outstanding barrister, he believed that Indians should take up positions in the government of their country that became available to them after the First World War. A brief period as a junior minister at the India Office in London in 1919-20 meant that an Indian voice was heard in the Lords for the first time.

After 1929, no one of Asian origin was seen in the Commons until 1987 when Keith Vaz was elected. It is unlikely that the four trailblazers, described so well in this book, would have regarded him with unqualified approval. ■