

Rishi Sunak and India's Anglophone World

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Summary

Rishi Sunak's ascent to the top of Britain's political heap coincides with the efforts by the Tories in the United Kingdom and the Bharatiya Janata Party in India to build a pragmatic framework for engagement between Delhi and London that transcends the prickly post-colonial phase in bilateral relations. The positive evolution of Delhi's ties with London in recent years is part of a deeper transformation of India's engagement with the Anglophone world.

The election of Rishi Sunak as the leader of Britain's Conservative Party and the 57th Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (UK) has been widely [viewed as a landmark](#) in the trajectory of Britain's Indian diaspora. It has also led to much celebration as well as [heated arguments](#) within the political class on the question of minorities making it to the top jobs within the Indian system. This elation and contestation, however, overlook Rishi Sunak's significance on at least four counts.

First, it points to the successful integration of the large Indian populations that settled down in the major Anglophone nations. For a long time, the United States (US), the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have seen steady growth in Indian immigration. They remain the preferred destinations for potential emigrants from India. Despite racism and xenophobia, the Anglophone world has been far more open to Indian immigration than any other part of the world.

The Indian diaspora has integrated itself well into these societies, taking ever more positions of influence in academia, business and civil society. They are increasingly part of politics in the host countries. The second-generation diaspora actively participates in electoral politics and is gaining an impressive presence in the executive and legislatures of the Anglo-Saxon world. Sunak, along with Kamala Harris, current Vice President of the US, reflect this growing trend.

Second, Sunak's rise to the top in Britain comes amidst a rapid and positive transformation of India's relations with the Anglophone world. In the second half of the 20th century, the growing weight of the Indian diaspora in the Anglo-Saxon world sat at odds with Delhi's prickly post-colonial relationship with the Anglo-Saxon world.

A number of factors contributed to this. India's very anglicised elites were at the forefront of persistent and trenchant criticism of the policies of Britain and the US. If Delhi wore its post-colonial chip on the shoulder with great flourish, the condescension of London's establishment towards India was equally visible.

While the Anglo-Saxon world tilted towards Pakistan in its disputes with India, especially over Kashmir, Delhi became a leading partner of the Soviet Union in the region. With the liberal elites turning left on economic policies under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, there was little room for commercial engagement to compensate for strategic differences.

All this changed in the 21st century as India rose and replaced Britain as the fifth largest economy in the world. The rapprochement between Delhi and Washington, followed by the Anglo-American pullback from Kashmir activism, helped build new Indian trust. The growing convergence on issues of Asian balance of power also laid the foundation of a new strategic partnership.

The transformation of India's political relations with the US and UK was not driven by the centre-left Congress Party that remained deeply suspicious of getting too close to Washington and London. It was led by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that pushed for a more self-assured and strong partnership with the Anglophone world.

The third is the role of the BJP in turning the Indian diaspora into a 'living bridge' between India and the UK and, more broadly, the Anglophone world. In the early decades after independence, the emigration of Indian professionals and talent was frowned upon as a 'brain drain'. If Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the first Indian prime minister from the BJP, flipped this argument to embrace the Indian diaspora and celebrate its achievements, current Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made [engagement with the diaspora](#) the top of India's diplomatic priorities. Rather than worry about brain drain, Modi has been pressing its Anglophone partners to open their borders to allow the entry of more Indian professionals.

The fourth is the new bonhomie between Britain's Tories and the BJP. That it is the Conservative party, traditionally hostile to immigrants, is the one to have elected the first Hindu and a son of Indian immigrants as prime minister underlines an important shift in British politics. Historically, the Indian diaspora in the UK and the political elite in Delhi were drawn to Labour which was more empathetic to their concerns.

As Labour, under Jeremy Corbyn, turned hostile to India over the questions of Kashmir and human rights, the Indian diaspora moved to the Conservative party. Some reports say the friends of the BJP in the UK played a key role in [mobilising the Hindu vote](#) in favour of the Tories during the 2019 general elections that saw a resounding victory for Boris Johnson. Sunak's [appointment of Suella Braverman](#), who had warned against rushing into a free trade agreement with India that might facilitate more Indian immigration, as the Home Secretary, underlines the continuing friction between London and Delhi over the question. Official Delhi, however, was not rattled and pointed to the fact that the two sides were [discussing the issues involved](#).

Under the [2021 Memorandum of Understanding](#) on "migration and mobility partnership", London agreed to let in more Indian professionals while India promised to take back illegal immigrants. Delhi is confident of the match between the demand for technical talent for British business and [India's surplus in this domain](#).

Meanwhile, Corbyn's successor, Keir Starmer, is [reaching out to the British Hindu communities](#) and promising Delhi that Labour will show [much greater sensitivity](#) to Indian concerns and interests. It is indeed a paradox that the BJP, with its deep nativist tradition, presided over a pragmatic rearrangement of India's post-colonial engagement with Britain.

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