

Southall: London's Little India

Shahi Nan Kabab opened in 1969



As soon as you step off the train in Southall you know it's a place with a difference. The station sign is in the Latin and Gurumukhi (Sikh) alphabet and one of the first buildings you see is the largest sikh temple outside India, the Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha which opened in 2003. Kebabs are waiting at Shahi Nan Kabab across the road from the station. The popular takeaway, with tables outside, has been there since 1969. It's menu as varied as its clients: sari clad women, Sikhs in colourful turbans, Somalis in long black abayas and elegantly suited businessmen.

There are ten gurdwaras in Southall. But despite the large number of sikhs, it is not an exclusively Sikh suburb. Over 55 percent of the population of 70,000 is Indian/Pakistani served by two large Hindu temples and three mosques: the Jamia Masjid Islamic Centre, the Central Jamia Masjid Mosque and the Abubakr Mosque. As well as an impressive collection of literary works, Ikra books has a large selection of hijabs and mens' clothing.

The South Asians arrived in 1950 reputedly recruited to work in a local factory owned by a former British Indian Army officer. The population grew due to significant employment opportunities including those provided by Heathrow Airport. The latest arrivals are the Somalis fleeing never ending civil wars in their country. In the 1920s and 30s Welsh migrants escaping from harsh economic conditions made their way to Southall.





Family run jewellery business

The shops are almost exclusively Asian: Southall has the largest Asian shopping centre in the London area.

The main street is the Broadway. Like all Southall streets it has no shortage of restaurants, dazzling clothing shops and gold jewellery shops. The well known restaurants include Chaudhry's TKC, and Gifto's Madhus. Mirch Masala, named after the most basic ingredient in Indian

cuisine, is the winner of a number of UK restaurant awards and was voted one of the top 100 restaurants by the Evening Standard. Imran Khan was among its customers. There is also an ingenious Chinese/Indian takeaway with birani on the menu in case the Chinese dishes are not to everyone's liking. McDonald's even developed a special halal menu for Southall.

Although eager to welcome a never ending stream of tourists, Southall's shop owners comment that the suburb is not what it used to be. When the South Asians first arrived the market was as thriving as a Delhi bazaar and is still a great place for bargains and authentic Asian ingredients.

But according to Aisha who has

lived in Southall for 28 years and run a family jewellery business for 12, things which should not be happening are happening. "There is more crime, the streets are becoming more dirty and crowded, there are fewer chain stores and small family businesses dominate. There is a lack of variety, we also need a British supermarket and not everyone wants to wear saris".



Fabric seller

Arab market with halal food



Southall has a large gas tower which is noticeable from miles away with the big letters "LH" and an arrow painted on it which showed airline pilots the direction to Heathrow airport. A number of famous films were made in Southall, including Bend It Like Beckham, the story of a Sikh girl who is offered a football scholarship to an American university and Dhan Ghana Dhan Goal a contemporary fictional story of the South Asian community in the UK told through the dynamic prism of professional football. The local community radio station Westside 89.6FM is part

of Ofcom's drive towards community-based radio services. There is also Sunrise Radio, Sukh Sagar Radio and Asian Gold Radio. Des Pardes weekly newspaper serves the Punjabi speaking community while the Star News serves Urdu readers. Both newspaper have English sections. But there is a danger that London's little India will become too Indian. Many of its residents cannot have a conversation in English. But this does not detract from an unreserved welcome for visitors who are always treated with respect and a cheerful smile.