

treat educated Indians in that way in the West End, how do they behave towards uneducated Indians in other parts of London?' He complained to the Home Secretary. Weeks later in India he received a reply setting out the various addresses he should write to if he wanted to pursue the matter.

I thought how the image of the London police had changed since I first arrived. What had happened to the friendly Dixon of Dock Green? There is a saying in my village, 'If the protector becomes the oppressor, even God cannot help.'

While my friend was staying with me it was difficult to paint and I was feeling restless. After he left I spent long hours painting, working with colours and forms, expressing my emotions. It was like being in a state of love and I felt at peace with myself.

Sometimes I sat by the window staring at the grey sky, looking for a patch of blue. The sun came out and I walked to St James's Park. It looked glorious in the autumn light. An old man sat alone on a bench observing life around him. He told me his wife had died eight years ago and he lived alone in a flat. Every day he went from park to park to see people and enjoy the scenery. He had a routine. First he would sit in the park, then go to a favourite pub before returning to his lonely flat.

Nearby a young man painted in water-colours. Children offered bread to the birds and the pelicans flapped their wings. The grass was covered with yellow leaves which were falling like raindrops. I spread my coat and sat down in a quiet place to write a letter to my parents.

As I was writing, three young people, two boys and a girl, came and sat a few yards away. A flower fell on my letter and I looked up. One of the boys was lying on top of the girl and the other boy was sitting next to them, holding a bunch of flowers. He must have picked them from the flowerbed. I continued writing. Another flower fell. I looked up again.

'Are you writing a poem?' the youth, a skinhead, asked.

'No, a letter.'

Suddenly he snatched it away from me and started to dance, waving the letter and chanting, 'He's writing a love letter. He's writing a love letter.'

I asked him to return it, but he still went on dancing.

'Give it back to him,' the girl shouted.



The youth crumpled the letter in his hand and threw it at me. 'Go away, you Paki bastard.'

The beautiful park had suddenly become a place of menace. I picked the letter up and quickly walked away towards the lake. I looked at the children feeding the birds. They were so innocent. I wondered how they could grow up to become such aggressive youths. What sort of education do they receive at home and at school which does not teach them to treat a stranger as a friend.

I left Wapping because I no longer felt safe in the East End. Now I felt threatened in the most respectable part of London.

When I first arrived, London was a safe place to live in. Gradually violence had become a natural part of life.

The incident in the park was so disturbing that whenever I saw a group of youths a feeling of panic went through my body. I tried to get over this by walking to the centre of London to see films and plays, but I was careful not to travel alone at night.

In February 1979 I read in the *Guardian* about an Indian woman teacher being subjected to a virginity test on her arrival at Heathrow. She had come with her fiancé, an Indian who worked in London and lived in Southall. She was examined by a male doctor to find out if she was a virgin. The Home Office admitted that the examination was carried out to ascertain if the woman was a genuine fiancée. If she was a virgin she would be unmarried and hence a fiancée. If not, she would be a married woman.

The woman teacher told the reporter that soon after her arrival at Heathrow she was sent for a medical examination by the immigration officials. A woman interpreter spoke to her in Hindi and asked her to undress.

'Then a man doctor came in. I asked for a dressing-gown, but it was not provided. I was most reluctant to have the examination but I did not know whether it was the normal practice here. The doctor said, through the nurse-interpreter, that he thought I had been pregnant before. I said that before marriage no Indian lady would do that sort of thing.'

The interpreter then translated the consent form for her and she signed it.

'I was frightened that otherwise they would send me back.'

The doctor then began to examine her.

'He was wearing rubber gloves and took some medicine out of



a tube and put it on some cotton and inserted it into me. He said he was deciding whether I was pregnant now or had been pregnant before. I said he could see that without doing anything to me. But he said there was no need to get shy. I have been feeling very bad mentally ever since. I was very embarrassed and upset. I had never had a gynaecological examination before.'

The Commission for Racial Equality protested. The Home Secretary wrote them a letter expressing his concern and confirming that immigration officers had been instructed not to ask the medical officer to examine passengers with a view to establishing whether they had borne children or had had sexual relations. Identical instructions were issued by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to British posts overseas. He revealed that in 1977 some 45,000 medical examinations were carried out at ports in the context of immigration control.

Virginity tests had been carried out on Indian women for over ten years, both in Britain and in India, but the women had been too embarrassed and frightened to complain in case they were refused entry into Britain. The incident at Heathrow, reported in the *Guardian*, brought the matter for the first time to the notice of the public. The Indian Government protested and the Indian press demanded reciprocal action.

In April that year the National Front decided to hold a meeting in Southall where many Indians live. The Indian residents believed the National Front was being deliberately provocative. The meeting took place in the Town Hall, heavily guarded by the police, as an anti-National Front demonstration was planned. Some 2,700 police equipped with riot shields and backed up by dogs, horses, and units of the Special Patrol Group protected the National Front from the demonstrators. Violence broke out, 345 people were arrested, and Blair Peach, a thirty-one-year-old schoolteacher, lost his life.

Against this background of humiliation and violence, the Festival of India was being planned to celebrate the relationship between India and Britain. High level committees were formed and to my surprise I was asked to join the Festival of India Committee in Britain.

When I attended my first committee meeting in 1980 I discovered that everything had already been decided by the two governments. There was nothing about contemporary India and the



festival events stopped at the time the British left. Modern art, literature, theatre, music, and, above all, village and tribal art had been forgotten. The Indian community living in Britain had also been ignored. I hoped the festival would give an opportunity to analyse what had happened to the culture of Indians living here, related to India's present and past. The involvement of the Indian community with its artists, writers, and creative people could have given the festival a real sense of participation. When I suggested an exhibition of contemporary Indian art a senior member of the committee remarked that the British public would not be interested.

'Have you asked them?' I said.

There was laughter among the committee members, but that was all.

The Indian High Commission invited Indian businessmen to contribute to the festival. They were pleased to be asked and gave money generously. It was ironic; their money was readily accepted, but the Indian artists living in Britain were not recognized as Indians for the purpose of the festival.

The Indian community wanted to participate by arranging their own events. A committee was set up but there was always the problem of money and space for venues. With modest means a number of items was planned and I was asked by the coordinator to work with the children in a multi-racial school in London to present a dance on the day of the opening of the festival. It was like being back in the school in the East End. There were Indian, African, and British children, both boys and girls. They painted and danced together and there was a great feeling of friendship. But the headmistress told me about her problems. Some of the children came from homes which supported the National Front and the children brought those attitudes to school. On the opening day when I was preparing the children to present their tiger dance outside the Royal Festival Hall, a well-dressed, middle-aged man came up to me, gave a Nazi salute, and walked on.

At the opening of an exhibition at the Science Museum I found myself in the VIP enclosure by mistake. Mrs Thatcher was standing alone, waiting patiently to receive the Indian prime minister. It was very cold. When the British prime minister saw me she came up to me, shook my hand, and smiled.



'Can I stand beside you?' she said. 'It's so draughty there.'

Before we had a chance to talk to each other she was quickly taken away by the Foreign Office staff. I had often heard her described as the Iron Lady but this briefest of encounters made me realize she was a real human being. In India ministers expect to be treated like gods and goddesses.

The Arts Council, responsible for promoting contemporary art in Britain, had devoted both its galleries to old Indian sculptures and crafts. I tried to get other public galleries in London interested in presenting an exhibition of works by Indian artists living in India and Britain. But nobody showed any interest. The President of the Royal Academy, also a member of the Festival of India Committee, was sympathetic and offered space in one of his galleries. But the exhibition was organized by a committee in Delhi set up by the Indian Government and the Indian artists in Britain were excluded. However, they managed to hold their own exhibition at the Barbican Arts Centre. The President of the Royal Academy, who had been unable to provide them with space in his galleries, came to open it. The title of the exhibition was 'Between Two Cultures' and had a mixed reception. National Front supporters showed an unexpected interest in art. Several of the exhibits were disfigured with racist slogans.

I arranged an exhibition of my own paintings at the Commonwealth Institute, giving performances of my 'Dancing Hands', relating movement to painting. I wanted to reach the children who visited the Institute on conducted tours from their schools.

The audiences joined in and the children loved to use their hands, imitating me. I felt as if I was back in Leeds or in the primary school in the East End.

During one of my performances I saw a little English boy of about three moving his hands, following me. He was accompanied by his grandmother. When I asked him to join me he shyly gave his own interpretation.

A young West Indian girl pointed at a painting and asked me what it meant.

'What does it mean to you?' I replied.