

Getting to the root of it: What Indians in and outside of Britain think of the new Prime Minister

With the Brexit, the cost-of-living crisis and multiple cabinet shuffles; the past year has been a tumultuous time for British politics. Since Rishi Sunak succeeded Liz Truss as Prime Minister, he has made headlines across the world for being Britain's first prime minister of Asian origin. With the changing immigrant face of Britain, could his ethnic background play a potential role in the next elections and international relations?

As per the 2021 government census, Asian Britons now account for 9.3 per cent of the population, and was the ethnic group that noted the largest population increase in recent years. Despite this, the electoral commission's figures in 2019 suggested that one in 4 Asian and Black voters is not registered to vote. A report published in 2009 found that very few Asians are registered to vote in England and Wales since many of them come from ineligible countries and even amongst registered Asian adults, the turnout was low.

As reported by The Guardian, a survey conducted in 2010 showed 61 per cent of British Indians regularly voting for Labour, a figure that has now been replaced by scattered numbers of support given to different parties depending on the age and religion of the voters. Older voters or those who are Christian and Hindu now tend to vote Conservative, while younger or most Muslim and Sikh voters lean towards Labour.

However, a recent shift in political preferences has been observed amongst those who are regular voters – a phenomenon that is growing increasingly apparent as a majority of British citizens are purportedly losing faith in the incumbent Conservative government.

Multiple scandals, the cost-of-living crisis and general dissatisfaction with the governing of a post Brexit Britain have cast shadows of doubt over voters' minds and while British Indian voters are happy to see a prime minister of a similar ethnic background, this seems to do little to change their political views.

Tushar Damle and his wife Renuka Damle live in West Yorkshire with their son. "I'm sure that Rishi will attract a lot of Indian origin voters, but people are fed up with the Conservative party breaking rules during COVID, and especially the whole Liz Truss debacle," says Tushar, who believes that Rishi Sunak has the behemoth task of reconciling his Indian roots with his party's anti-immigration stance.

Main concerns for many in the country include the cost-of-living crisis and the worsening woes of transport and NHS workers. "The Conservatives are anti-unions but there is an economic issue with just giving in to the striking unions, and I think Sunak has struck the right balance so far," says Renuka, who works in an administrative department of the NHS and has been closely following the political developments in relation to the nurses strikes.

Meanwhile, Sunak's policies on immigration and education seem to have brought up international concerns, such as youth in countries like India who are contemplating a move abroad for academic purposes. "I understand the problem of piggy backing on student visas, but there are far more effective ways to control that," says Rhys Martins. "For example, they could make conversion from student to work visas harder for non-profitable courses like the United States does."

The news of Sunak's appointment as Prime Minister has also sparked mixed reactions amongst many Indians. "The fact that the prime minister of another country openly accepts his Indian roots is

definitely a good thing for our global status,” says Deepti Joglekar, while others harbour more cynical views in terms of India’s relations with Britain. “I’m happy to see the representation, but it wouldn’t be wise to have great expectations. He considers himself British first and so will obviously look at their interests first,” says Kamakshi Barve, who avidly follows international politics.

As Sunak and his government attempt to steer a seemingly fragmented Britain over troubled water, most Britons await the upcoming elections with bated breath.

“Labour hasn’t really come out with any policies per se and it is a tall order to ask Rishi to completely change the public perception of Tories, so I’m not sure what I would be voting for,” says Tushar, who is one of the many who are now finding themselves caught between a rock and a hard place as they try to decide who they would vote for. “It’s going to be difficult. Unfortunately, we have to choose the best of a bad bunch now!”

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