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Two Decades and Little Change: British Asians, Football and Calls for Action

Abstract

Only ten British Asian professional footballers are competing in England out of approximately 4,000 despite there being a population of 3.6 million in England and Wales. Just six British Asian footballers between the ages of 16 to 18 years old were attached to the 72 Football League academies in 2009 out of over 1,300 players. There is only one British Asian coach out of the 522 senior football coaches in England. These figures speak volumes and are the reason why academics, campaign groups and key stakeholders have investigated, and attempted to combat, the British Asian football exclusion. This work will offer a detailed academic review of over 20 years of research in this field before adding new empirical data. It critically analyses several reform strategies that have been created by key stakeholders. Finally, I will present various recommendations for reform which are borne out of a decade of primary research.

Key words: British Asians, football, racism, exclusion, equality

Introduction

The power and reach of sport cannot be underestimated as the globalisation era has seen the World Cup and the Olympics become 'mega-events'. The global reach of the English Premier League (EPL) is a case in point. Manchester United, Manchester City, Chelsea, Arsenal and Liverpool have 32 million Twitter followers collectively, at the time of writing. Because football has become a global game, then, it is believed to have transcended socio-cultural differences. As of 10 October 2013,

the BBC website noted that there were 61 different nationalities playing in the Premier League at the beginning of the 2013-14 season. Although football was once considered a game for the urban working class, it has now become 'a symbol of multicultural Britain'.¹ But, despite football being a global export, there are local exclusions that deserve highlighting.

British Asian communities, Britain's largest black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) group, have traditionally been excluded from the nation's favourite game, football. Despite Roy Smith, Ricky Heppollette and Jimmy Carter, all of South Asian descent, blazing a football trail between the 1950s and early 1990s, very little has changed regarding British Asian participation at elite level. On the other hand, there has been an abundance of black British players since Viv Anderson, Garth Crooks and Laurie Cunningham broke through in the mid 1970s. In the last two decades, however, the number of British Asians with professional contracts has averaged between five and ten players while black players make up approximately a quarter of the professional English game. If British Asian communities de-prioritised football, one could argue that this study would appear futile. Yet, as Bains and Johal,² Burdsey,³ and Kilvington⁴ all emphasise that football is popularly played, watched and loved by British Asian groups. Therefore, if a social group is excluded from a field, in this case football, one could strongly argue that it is worthy of investigation.

First, the article will provide some valuable historical context by exploring the role and importance of football in the Indian subcontinent and among diasporic South Asian communities. The research then draws on previous literature to offer a critical understanding of the barriers preventing the inclusion of British Asians in football.

Original primary data will be presented to empirically illustrate the most pressing barriers affecting British Asian football communities. After a brief methodology, the work examines several inclusion strategies established by football's key stakeholders. The article ends by offering six, empirically formed, recommendations for reform.

In sum, this paper aims to:

- Provide a holistic overview of literature which critically investigates the exclusion of British Asian footballers;
- Use the existing literature to highlight overlooked environments and communities which are worthy of further investigation;
- Use primary and secondary research to showcase how exclusionary barriers are affecting British Asian groups;
- Use recently captured primary research to shape recommendations for reform to challenge the exclusion of British Asians in football;

Football, the Indian Subcontinent and Migration

Football is often incorrectly labelled a 'new' sport in the Indian subcontinent. For Bandyopadhyay, 'sports like cricket and football came to be utilized by the British as an important means of Anglicizing the indigenous rulers from 1880s onwards'.⁵ These sports were believed to not only mentally discipline colonial subjects by teaching them rules, but also help enhance their inferior physical 'frame'.⁶ The colonisers aimed to somewhat 'improve' the indigenous peoples' physicality, morality, culture and 'way of life' through the acquisition of sport. Kapadia⁷ thus highlights that 'football in India has a continuous history that stretches back to the nineteenth century'. This demonstrates that football was

not alien to the thousands of South Asians who migrated to Britain during the mid-twentieth century as Bandyopadhyay⁸ suggests that by the mid 1880s football clubs around Calcutta had spread adding a new dimension to 'Bengali sociocultural life' and by 1900, 'football sank deep' into the 'remoter parts of Bengal'. In other words, football is not a new cultural practice among South Asian diasporas and during the mass migratory flows to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, football travelled with South Asian migrants and 'did not "meet them at the gates"'.⁹

Research suggests that football is certainly not an unimportant subculture among South Asian heritage communities. A survey conducted by Manchester University illustrated British Asians' love for the game as 60 per cent of British Bangladeshi boys played football, 43 per cent of British Pakistanis took part and 36 per cent of British Indians played the game compared to 47 per cent of young white boys played regularly. For Burdsey 'football is an extremely popular and socially significant activity for increasing numbers of young British Asian men'.¹⁰

While cricket was perhaps more popular among first generation migrants, progressive generational differences have resulted in football becoming the number sport for successive generations of British Asians. Sport can be seen as a societal mirror for cultural change and identity formation. Yet, despite this journey, and love for the game, the fact still remains – British Asians are heavily excluded from football, at all levels.

Common-sense explanations and academic answers

Although South Asian communities possess a relationship with football that stretches back almost 130 years, there have been very few success stories observed within English professional football. Because visibility at elite level has been so minimal, embedded stereotypes remain, e.g. parents prioritise education, religion outweighs sport, football is unpopular, physical sports are not suited to the 'Asian frame', etc. Although there is a degree of truth to some of these common-sense rationales, particularly among first generation migrant experiences, they have been embellished and popularly employed to explain the exclusion of British Asians from English professional football. In turn, British Asians are perceived as the determining agents in their own exclusion.

Until 1996, one could not provide a concrete rebuttal to the simplistic and essentialist arguments that had been put forward to explain this exclusion – apart from those common-sense explanations listed above. Enter Bains and Patel¹¹, whose seminal study became the first to specifically focus on the British Asian exclusion from English football. Their ironically titled report, *Asians Can't Play Football*, sought to explore this phenomenon by employing a multi-disciplinary approach to capture the barriers and challenge them. Bains and Patel's key findings suggested that football within predominantly South Asian heritage environments was underdeveloped; there had traditionally been a lack of emphasis placed on youth football; football insiders tend to physically and culturally stereotype British Asian players; and methods of player recruitment naturally discriminated against Asian heritage players. This comprehensive study, which harbours a wealth of empirical data, should have helped kick start the 'Asians in football' movement. From an institutional perspective however, it did not. Yet, from an academic standpoint, the last two decades has

witnessed many scholars attempt to challenge, improve and update Bains and Patel's breakthrough study.

Bains and Johal's¹² *Corner Flags and Corner Shops* highlighted football's growing popularity within British Asian communities while it also provided important background concerning football within the Indian subcontinent. This work was the first to really centre the South Asian voice as it presented the oral testimonies and stories of Asian heritage players, fans and administrators, thus offering a much-needed personal narrative. This storytelling method acts as a 'kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression'.¹³ Storytelling, one of the central tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), helps us to 'uproot the dysconscious racism or uncritical and distorted ways of thinking about race that have led to tacit acceptance of the dominant White norms and privileges'.¹⁴

Cultural difference has been a central theme within much of the academic debate regarding British Asians and football. Bains and Johal¹⁵ and Johal¹⁶ note that British Asians encounter additional and heightened barriers in comparison to black players, Britain's second largest minority ethnic group. Burdsey's¹⁷ work, on the other hand, was the first to explore and attempt to gauge the experiences of both Anglo Asian and British Asian players. While British Asians may not harbour the correct 'cultural passport',¹⁸ Anglo Asian players are able to integrate with greater ease as they are more likely to possess a lighter skin tone, a diluted sense of 'Asianness', and already have white contacts and networks to draw upon. Those who adhere more strongly to a strict or 'traditional' South Asian culture are marked out as 'outsiders', incompatible with the norms and behaviours of football.

It has also been articulated that British Asian football communities compete, or prefer to compete, within segregationist environments. Put simply, not only do we have 'parallel communities living parallel lives', as was stated by the Cattle Report,¹⁹ we also have parallel football communities playing parallel football. Because of this, British Asian communities are blamed for their own exclusion. This shifts the blame and instead of focusing on structural inequalities, this colour-blind and post-racial response apportions the blame onto the excluded group. Under this guise, it is not the responsibility of key stakeholders to reach out to British Asians communities, but it is these communities that must change to integrate within football.

Academic research has been invaluable here as oral testimonies have shown that British Asian football communities did not initially set out to create separatist football environments. Johal²⁰ postulates that many British Asians attempted to join white clubs during the 1960s and 1970s but they were met with a non-welcoming exclusionary policy, with many being verbally and physically assaulted. Football clubs are renowned for their 'cliquey-ness' and if one does not possess the correct social and cultural capital, it is difficult to gain access and acceptance within existing social networks. Bourdieu²¹ notes that these capitals function as a form of social magnetism which guides participants towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices which suit the occupants of that position. Thus, to partake of the sport, British Asians had little option but to create their own structures. Burdsey²² and Kilvington and Price²³ suggest that these developments occurred to protect themselves from racial abuse while still partaking of the sport. Bradbury²⁴ provides the most comprehensive account of why these 'all-Asian'

structures were established while Bradbury²⁵ and Kilvington²⁶ offer a number of reasons as to why they are likely to remain 'all-Asian' years and decades after being created.

Nine years after Bains and Patel's²⁷ landmark study, the *Asians Can Play Football* report commented that although 'all-Asian' leagues exist for a purpose, they are 'not the answer to the problem of Asian under-representation in the professional game'.²⁸ This message appears to have been understood as the most famous and high-profile 'all-Asian' league, the Asian Premier League (APL), formerly the Asian Football League (AFL), recently merged with the mainstream East London Football League.

Despite being established as short term solutions to avoid racial discrimination, 'all-Asian' leagues, teams and tournaments have operated outside the radar of recruiters and have prolonged the exclusion.²⁹ There are numerous reasons regarding why talent identification systems, which are built on networks of white knowledge, have consistently and categorically overlooked 'all-Asian' football spaces.³⁰ First, in the majority of cases, professional clubs recruit players from a small selection of established amateur leagues and rarely extend their observations beyond them. Second, specialist leagues are believed to constitute a lower standard of football. Third, most 'all-Asian' structures are believed to be adult-dominated and these players are past the 'golden age' of learning. Finally, many gatekeepers believe that the more talented players, whatever background, will compete in mainstream spaces. Burdsey³¹ summarises, stating that football history has been whitewashed and the British Asian passion for football has been a hidden truth for generations.

Kilvington³² adopted a CRT perspective as its five tenets help researchers focus on 'the all-encompassing web of race to further our understanding of inequality'.³³ Hylton adds that this framework can be used to investigate 'the racism in society that privileges whiteness as it disadvantages others because of their "blackness"'.³⁴ Kilvington³⁵, like Bains and Johal³⁶ and Burdsey,³⁷ centralises British Asian voices to highlight the structural racisms that exist within player recruitment. The oral testimonies of British Asian players indicate that they are routinely overlooked and are physically and culturally stereotyped among recruiters. The perception of having to be two or three times better than anyone else on the pitch was a common experience felt by many British Asian players. British Asian coaches and scouts expressed their belief that players were still being unfairly judged and stereotyped with one participant suggesting that players of South Asian heritage are still considered a 'gamble' among gatekeepers. This hidden, invisible and embedded racism is very difficult to prove and challenge, yet Kilvington³⁸ does offer several reform strategies to combat these inequalities.

Although football attempts to promote and protect its meritocratic ideological myth, it is a long way from being egalitarian as the racisms encountered by British Asian football communities have prevented inclusion. A one size fits all response to the British Asian exclusion is ill-advised. Kilvington's³⁹ was the first to really devote considerable attention to the differences in experience between British Asian groups across cultural, religious, generational and geographical lines. By employing a triangulation of methods, Kilvington's research highlighted the similarities and differences that exist between British Asian football communities residing in

Bradford, Leicester and London. These communities had encountered similar experiences such as overt racism. However, it was highlighted that Leicester's 'all-Asian' football organisations were considerably better developed at youth level when compared with Bradford. Therefore, recommendations that are put forward need to be aware of these differences and complexities and reform strategies must not homogenise and essentialise the singular Asian 'experience'.

Two decades of debate and academic scrutiny has resulted in a relatively large and detailed body of work on the British Asian football exclusion. Yet, the literature is male dominated as few scholars have critically explored the experiences of British Asian females.⁴⁰ Moreover, Kilvington⁴¹ notes that studies have tended to investigate the British Asian 'experience' in a relatively singular capacity. In addition, there is one particular South Asian heritage group that has received little or no attention among the academic community – Tamils. The Tamil community founded the British Tamil Football League (BTFL) in 1997 to help promote football among the Tamil groups. Moreover, the annual Tamil football tournament has been running for a number of years. But this diasporic community has been largely overlooked within the 'Asians in football' debate.

After critically examining the literature on British Asians and football, there are some gaps in the field which I hope future researchers will address. The following section uses primary and secondary data to highlight, and summarise, the most pressing barriers facing British Asian football communities.

A summary of the barriers

This section offers a succinct overview of the barriers facing British Asian football communities. Although a plethora of barriers exist, only three will be discussed. First, overt racism at grass-roots level continues to make football a hostile environment for some British Asian players. This is illustrated in the following oral testimony:

The adult side got into a cup final and the opposition were white, we were predominantly Asian. A lot of the white fans were drunk and all we got was torrents of abuse from the stands. It was overt stuff like: 'Get that monkey'; 'you black this'; 'you paki that'; 'fuck off back home'; the whole works. (British Pakistani amateur player, 4 October 2014)

Burdsey,⁴² Johal⁴³ and Kilvington and Price⁴⁴ have captured and documented this issue with considerable evidence. Although Kilvington⁴⁵ claims that overt racism is a greater problem within the Midlands and northern England, as opposed to football in London, it is one that needs to be better addressed and more vehemently challenged country-wide. The players' story above emphasise that football is not 'post-racial' and that overt racism is still very much embedded within grass-roots environments. This hostility deters some communities from competing in mainstream spaces.

Second, covertly racist practises in the talent identification process continue to ignore British Asian football talent. Bains and Patel,⁴⁶ Burdsey⁴⁷ and Kilvington⁴⁸ have all indicated that predominantly British Asian environments are avoided by football's gatekeepers. This is demonstrated below:

I've never seen a scout watch a match here in 18 years. (British Pakistani amateur player, 4 October 2014)

Moreover, white scouts and coaches tend to blame British Asians for their own exclusion, and in some cases, biologically stereotype players of South Asian descent as inferior.⁴⁹ Because of such stereotypes, as well as other factors, there has been a lack of networks between clubs in predominantly British Asian locales and professional, and semi-professional, clubs. Therefore, 'all-Asian' football teams, clubs, leagues and tournaments are rarely visited by gatekeepers. That said, it has been suggested that links have started to grow in recent years.⁵⁰

Third, particularly across northern England, there has traditionally been a lack of opportunities at grassroots youth level within predominantly British Asian environments. This finding was first articulated by Bains and Patel⁵¹ and has subsequently been re-evaluated by Kilvington.⁵² While dozens of clubs, with a wide variety of age ranges, exist within 'whiter' or more rural areas of West Yorkshire, spaces which are predominantly British Asian, have traditionally harboured very few football opportunities. This is encapsulated by the following participant:

There was nothing [playing opportunities] round here, absolutely nothing ... There were hardly any pitches here mate to be honest with you never mind teams. (British Pakistani former academy player, 13 July 2011)

Leicester, on the other hand, is decades ahead of Bradford as many 'all-Asian' clubs were formed in the 1960s and 1970s. Bradford is playing catch up but clubs such as Shapla FC and Bradford Horton Sports have recently emerged, providing much need youth provision for aspiring players. Opportunities are starting to arise, however, a number of research participants offered a cautionary note, suggesting that British

Asian youths must display greater desire, dedication and commitment towards football:

I personally think that the dedication is lacking ... I've always said though, if one breaks through, I think a few will follow and attitudes will change. (British Indian chairman of semi-professional team, 12 July 2011)

Some of my players are gifted. They're talented, certainly. But, they don't have the same desire ... It's the lack of role models, that's why (British Indian coach, 4 April 2011).

This apparent lack of focus and dedication could arguably be intensified due to the paucity of role models.⁵³ Football may therefore appear a 'cul-de-sac' career for young British Asians and not worth taking seriously. Hoberman notes that 'many black children grow up assuming that they were simply born with athletic ability, and some coaches encourage them in this belief'.⁵⁴ On the other hand, young British Asians may embrace a 'lack of confidence' or adopt a defeatist approach as very few pioneers have participated at the highest level.⁵⁵

Twenty years of study has been conducted on this very topic, but very little has changed as representation is still extremely minimal at elite level. What is being done by key stakeholders to combat this issue? What further can be done to increase diversity and challenge inequality? These questions will be answered after a brief methodology.

Methodology

This research incorporates qualitative work to understand the actions and processes that have excluded British Asian football communities. A purposive sampling

strategy, which ‘allows the researcher to home in on people or events which there are good grounds for believing will be critical for the research’⁵⁶ was utilised as 75 individual voices were consulted for this study.

The investigation adopts a CRT approach and centralises minority voices. In addition, the research calls for action and proposes recommendations for reform. As a result, this work cannot be truly neutral and thus it adheres to a partisan perspective. To a certain degree then, this research, and CRT in general, are examples of what Burrell and Morgan⁵⁷ label ‘radical humanism (subjective-change)’. Using a CRT approach, however, does not mean that all the participants’ views will be taken as unchallengeable facts. For this reason, a constructionism (mutually constructed data) approach is favoured over the feminist choice of emotionalism (authentic experiences). As Burdsey notes, it is ‘important to maintain a critical approach to players’ stories, and to not take what players say as unequivocal “truths” or the reflection of an external reality that exists outside representation’.⁵⁸ Therefore, other methods were employed to assist in the validation of the data.

Not only must the researcher attempt to remain critical, they must also understand the ways in which the researcher can influence the results. Therefore, providing a critical reflection of the ‘self’ is paramount. Gobo describes this as ‘the self-aware analysis of the dynamics between researcher and participants, the critical capacity to make explicit the position assumed by the observer in the field, and the way in which the researcher’s positioning impacts on the research process’.⁵⁹ Reflexivity allows us to understand that there are not only alternative discourses out there but, the researcher themselves can affect and shape the results.

My investigation, which first began in 2007, has seen 44.5 hours of data being collected through interviews and focus groups, with the total number of transcribed words equalling 119,969. Although I fully understand that the researchers' identity can influence and shape results, the recommendations presented in the penultimate section are the consensus views put forward by the participants featured in this study. The oral testimonies of British Asian participants are fundamental to this work. Hylton notes, 'the "lived experiences" ... of those voices rarely heard in sport ... are highly valued'.⁶⁰ The following section critically examines the current policies and strategies being used to combat the British Asian football exclusion.

Challenging the Exclusion: Tried, Tested and Failed?

Several key stakeholders, academics and activists have attempted to challenge the British Asian exclusion in the last two decades. Bains and Patel's⁶¹ landmark study cited the efforts of Aston Villa FC and Bradford City FC while Burdsey⁶² highlighted the action of Charlton Athletic Racial Equality (CARE). These examples, however, are rather dated now and thus, this section critically analyses some of the most high-profile and contemporary British Asian football inclusion programmes. I will discuss institutional responses, the work of professional clubs, and the action (or in-action) of campaign groups.

Institutional Level: The FA

The FAs Bringing Opportunities To Communities (BOTC) plan, launched in 2015, involves face-to-face consultations with 402 participants and therefore the action plans are informed according to the participants' general consensus on key issues.

The FA have set themselves some rather ambitious targets for the 2017-18 season, as they hope to:

- Achieve 10 percent BAME FA registered referees (4 percent in 2013-14)
- Achieve 10 percent BAME Level 1 and Level 2 coaches (6 percent in 2013-14)
- Have 50,000 playing opportunities for boys and girls
- Ensure 2,000 male or female players have completed a Talent Identification Assessment
- Create 200 new Asian Recruitment Officers

Central to the success of the BOTC plan are the Community Development Centres (CDCs). These centres intend to create playing opportunities for boys and girls within predominantly South Asian heritage environments. Prior to the FAs endorsement of this strategy, it was first implemented in conjunction with QPR and the West Middlesex and Hayes Youth League in 2011. Initially called the Player Development Centre (PDC), it was soon rebranded as CDCs because, according to its creator:

The name was changed to make it more relevant with the community, so it became a community development centre ... because it was placed in between the grassroots and academy player development centre level. (British Indian coach, 26 February 2016)

This strategy seeks to offer playing opportunities within the immediate locale of British Asian youngsters. Furthermore, it also offers coach development pathways. While the FA and CFA play a key role in the inception of CDCs, it is hoped that they will become self-sufficient in future years.

There are potential problems with this strategy though. First, will these environments, largely because of their location, remain 'Asian' and contribute further to the 'parallel football' phenomenon which has arguably exacerbated the British Asian exclusion from elite level? Should we not be seeking some sort of inclusive and integrated football space? Second, there has been growing discomfort at 'Asian-only' events among British Asian groups as they are perceived to present Asian communities as special cases in need of differential treatment. These CDCs might be judged to be 'special' environments. Considering these potential criticisms, an FA spokesperson commented:

This plan is about participation so it's about getting boys and girls playing football under a qualified coach ... But, over time, we're looking at that becoming more organised and affiliated. (18 August 2015)

CDCs are therefore primarily concerned about providing a football experience for young children who might not have access to local football. Although this strategy may appear to have established another 'separatist' football space, the above interviewee argues that these spaces are not exclusive. CDCs are open to all but Asian heritage groups are specifically targeted. These football opportunities may appear insular in the interim stages but CDCs will eventually create affiliated teams within mainstream leagues. If sustainability is accomplished, CDCs may well help significantly increase the numbers of British Asians involved in football.

Another action plan involves club support. The FA will work with 50 'Asian' clubs in the first season. The following British Bangladeshi participant, who has recently

established a grassroots club, is a recipient of the FAs help, as well as other stakeholders.

We were successful in getting funding as we got £1,500 to get a team affiliated and put into a league as well ... Without their support we wouldn't have been able to do it. (1 June 2015)

The FA meet, assess and offer capacity-building support for grassroots 'Asian' clubs, including coach development. Dialogue between 'Asian' clubs and the FA, professional clubs and other key stakeholders is paramount in the bid to achieve inclusion.

Professional clubs must understand the barriers that British Asian football communities encounter, accept that racisms have played a fundamental role in the exclusion, and attempt to fully support the inclusion movement, if we are to observe any positive change. Gaining the full cooperation of professional clubs is sometimes challenging. This is emphasised by the following scout co-ordinator, who, when asked if he had ever tried to scout any British Asian players, said:

We haven't looked to be honest with you but there's none in the leagues that we follow. You've got to bear in mind that although we do as much as we can and we probably do more than most for the community, we're not here primarily for the community. (2 June 2011)

This comment indicates that equality and diversity issues are palmed off as a 'community' issue and one that is the responsibility of anti-discrimination or football in the community groups, rather than football clubs. This illustrates that

football clubs are considered businesses; player recruitment is not something to gamble with as talent identification systems continue to target established and spaces which are built on networks of white knowledge.⁶³

Despite there being weaknesses with the BOTC plan, it nevertheless marks a milestone moment regarding the British Asians and football movement. The CDCs could prove effective but it is important to construct links between CDCs and local leagues. Professional clubs also play a key role in this debate. Some clubs, however, will dismiss the BOTC plan, which may limit the success of this movement.

Professional Clubs: 'Asian Star' (2009 - present)

Chelsea FC's *Asian Star* offers children of Asian heritage between the ages of eight and 12 the opportunity to win a year-long placement within the Chelsea FC Foundation Elite Training Centre (pre 2012, the prize was a week-long trial at Chelsea FC's academy). The annual event provides British Asian youngsters the opportunity to showcase their talents within the radar of coaches and scouts who are invited to attend by Chelsea FC. But, despite being in its eighth year, no winner has been signed to Chelsea's academy permanently.

This initiative appears to confront some recruitment barriers that British Asians encounter. This opportunity aids those who participate 'under the radar of the FA, key stakeholders and existing football structures'.⁶⁴ Chelsea Foundation bring British Asian players to gatekeepers. A Chelsea Foundation spokesperson highlighted the reasons behind its conception:

Is it down to a lack of opportunities? If it is, here's the opportunity. Then, it's up to the Asian community to take that opportunity that's been provided. Is it a special case? Yes, because it deserves to be a special case. (13 May 2011)

The event provides opportunities for Asian heritage youngsters. But, considering the movement away from 'Asians in football' to 'inclusion for all', one could suggest that this event or model requires some attention, remodelling or rebranding. Providing opportunities for just one ethnic group not only makes them a 'special case', it maintains segregation.⁶⁵

Despite the criticisms, Chelsea FC have identified the problem and have targeted British Asian communities to tackle the exclusion. They offer a solution to some, but not all, of the myriad of barriers that exclude British Asian football communities.

Campaign Groups: Kick It Out

First, Kick It Out aim to raise awareness of the exclusion and attempt to publicise British Asians in football. Second, the Asians in Football Forum (AIFF) was formed by Kick It Out to bring together key figures within the grassroots and professional spheres. This forum represents a platform whereby experiences can be shared and policies can be discussed with the aim of implementation. Unfortunately, though, due to the lack of progression in the professional game, this forum has been criticised by participants within this research. The oral testimony below highlights the forum's lack of success:

I sit on a number of panels and I think, we were here this time last year talking about the same thing, but what has actually happened? ... what has

actually been implemented? It's nothing. (British Bangladeshi semi-professional footballer, 5 April 2011)

Prominent individuals and groups from the 'Asians in football' scene attend these forums but it is now perceived to be more of a 'talking shop'. Yet, Kick It Out are just a lobbying group and are not actually able to implement any policies themselves. If Kick It Out became an independent organisation it would have more power and independence. But, until then, Kick It Out's attempts to challenge the British Asian exclusion could be considered 'piecemeal'.⁶⁶

Recommendations for reform

The previous section illustrated several reform strategies. These policies and programmes can be largely traced back and identified throughout the academic literature on British Asians and football. Bains and Patel⁶⁷ suggested that football 'roadshows' would be the ideal scenario to help bridge the divide between professional clubs and local British Asian communities. These 'roadshows', which sound remarkably similar to the FAs newly implemented CDC plan, would offer playing opportunities for children while parents would also be encouraged to attend.

McGuire, Monks and Halsall⁶⁸ build on this noting that more clubs should create specific opportunities for British Asian youngsters. They also argue that more professional clubs should begin to recruit from 'Asian' leagues, academies should devote an increased focus on cultural awareness, and British Asian communities themselves should become more active and mobile when responding to inclusion initiatives. McGuire, Monks and Halsall's recommendations, however, should be treated with caution as some of their suggestions have become somewhat outdated,

e.g. 'Asian' leagues, such as the APL, are no longer major leagues as many have merged with mainstream leagues.

Randhawa⁶⁹ too offers recommendations including more inclusive football clubs, a greater emphasis on tackling grassroots racism, and improved links with professional clubs and British Asian football communities. And, although Burdsey's body of research is arguably the most comprehensive, his work rarely offers clear recommendations for reform. Burdsey⁷⁰ does note, however, that short-term solutions, such as matches involving the UK Asian XI, who competed against Bradford City and Leyton Orient over a decade ago, give British Asian players the opportunity to be observed, and potentially recruited, while longer term strategies including the development of grassroots coaching programmes and improved facilities would aid progression.

In this penultimate section, then, I add to this ongoing conversation – how do we challenge the British Asian football exclusion? It is worth noting that the following recommendations are the consensus views of the participants involved in a decade-long investigation. This is fundamental, as Lentin⁷¹ notes, 'Often in anti-racism, representation has been constructed on the basis of assumptions by white anti-racists, made without consulting the populations whose interests they feel themselves to be representing'.

The recommendations aim to increase the visibility of British Asians in participation, coaching, scouting, refereeing, fandom and administration, at all levels. The solutions are by no means perfect as each one contains problems, difficulties and

complexities. There is no quick fix or unitary response. This issue is complex and it urges key stakeholders to understand reform strategies from a variety of standpoints. British Asians are a community of communities and thus, they cannot be homogenised as action plans must be aware of the social, cultural and religious differences between groups. In addition, British Asian groups do not want 'special' pathways into the game. Instead, participants involved in this research want to enter football through the mainstream door, not a 'special' door. Therefore, the recommendations put forward in this work are not exclusive to just British Asian communities as they could be implemented to aid inclusion for all excluded groups. These recommendations would be used to target British Asians, but no recommendation or inclusion event would be specifically 'Asian-only'.

First, *anti-racism should be enforced more vehemently within football, at all levels.* At grassroots level, players, managers and fans should be better protected against verbal abuse, i.e. racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. The KIO Reporting App plays a significant role here. Support, guidance and a clear complaints procedure should be easily identifiable and visibly marketed by the key stakeholders of grassroots provision. Referees must also adopt and enforce a standard tariff and penalty for hate-speech and this must be made explicit to amateur players before the season commences, during the season and online, e.g. FA website. Furthermore, it could be suggested that players found guilty of hate-speech should be encouraged to attend an anti-discriminatory educational workshop, facilitated by the CFA or KIO. It could be argued that these suggestions would make the grassroots environment a safer and more welcoming space.

Racism also exists within recruitment and a biennial equality and diversity workshop would help challenge covert forms. The FA should fund and facilitate an event whereby all relevant academy personnel and members of football in the community programmes are invited. BAME groups would be encouraged to attend this platform as it provides a space for them to network and share their football experiences. This workshop, which could be held locally by all CFAs, would raise awareness of the inequalities that affect marginalised groups while it would also provide a platform whereby diverse football communities can construct links.

Constructing and developing links between professional clubs and British Asian football communities is fundamental:

Everything must be linked. So, a grassroots club should be linked to a professional community foundation. That's linked with an academy and that's linked with the club. You've got to have natural progression. (British Bangladeshi coach, 8 September 2014)

Historically, many professional clubs have failed to acknowledge the British Asian exclusion. Randhawa⁷² adds that many key stakeholders do not understand British Asian communities. This lack of understanding is demonstrated in the following oral testimony:

I'm a Sikh, right. We had a meeting with [a community representative at a football club] and the first thing he said was: 'Oh, do you lot need prayer mats and prayer rooms'? I wasn't upset with him but he'd already painted a picture before he'd worked with us. What they were thinking automatically was: 'Do we need to build a prayer room'? (British Indian coach, 3 June 2011)

Without interaction, it is likely that stereotypical notions of 'Asianness' may deter clubs from forming partnerships with British Asian groups. The British Asian 'community' is perceived as alien, 'Other' and homogenous.⁷³ With the construction of links though, these barriers will be slowly eroded. Greater dialogue will increase understanding of the barriers and help facilitate inclusion.

Third, *more grassroots opportunities* must be established as less teams exist in predominantly British Asian environments, notably in the north.⁷⁴ Teams not only create opportunities for players but they create other roles too, e.g. coaches, administrators, referees, supporters, etc. Clubs in densely populated British Asian areas must be created and key stakeholders, such as the FA and CFAs, play a vital role. There are more opportunities countrywide, however, than ever before as new teams, clubs and organisations have begun to flourish in recent years. The doors are now ajar, but they must be walked through and opportunities must be grabbed with both hands; if they are ignored, the status-quo will remain. It could be argued that role models have the power to challenge the stereotypes which arguably hold back excluded communities.⁷⁵

Role models must be identified and highlighted. Coyle suggests that trailblazers help spark an 'intense' response among onlookers that manifests into the following idea: '*I want to be like them*'.⁷⁶ This spark forms the 'ignition' stage which leaves some learners 'involved, captivated [and] hooked'.⁷⁷ If one envisages a field or a cultural practice that constitutes a long-term, viable career path, one will devote more time and effort to it. Creating and publicising British Asian players as role models can be effective, but also problematic as, in some cases, it has led to the trend of 'over-

hyping'.⁷⁸ Moreover, Burdsey⁷⁹ argues that profiling players as role models separates these players along the lines of ethnicity, which may also go against the player's wishes.

The fifth recommendation calls for the *creation and development of British Asian coaches*. This is advocated below:

We need to get more coaches from Asian communities qualified and developing their own clubs and own structures. (British Indian coach, 31 April 2011)

If there are more Asian coaches then they'll inspire younger players; they'll see a father figure within the game. They would be more inclined to go into the profession, and they may try harder. (British Bangladeshi coach, 20 April 2011)

More coaches create more clubs; more clubs create more players; more players result in more chance of being recruited; and if more British Asian personnel are operating in grassroots football, this should eventually have a knock-on effect to the professional game. Several participants added that qualified and experienced British Asian coaches and scouts would be valuable assets at professional clubs. First, these individuals may become role models. Second, these individuals are more likely to have contacts within British Asian communities which may help bridge the gap between professional and grassroots clubs. Third, British Asian coaches will be able to educate non-Asian coaches on Asian heritage communities and help challenge stereotypes.

Sixth, *short-term events do offer benefits* and 'Asian Star' is a prime example.

Although this event arguably needs a rebrand, it brings recruiters to players, a barrier that has plagued British Asian communities for decades. Similar events should be held across the country, at clubs who have large numbers of British Asians in their locale. With regional expansion, more players of Asian heritage would be observed and potentially recruited.

These recommendations can be used as a guide for any individual, group or organisation that wishes to increase the numbers of British Asians in football.

Positive action is underway but there is still a long way to go before we can shift the focus and begin to confidently discuss the British Asian football inclusion, rather than football exclusion.

Conclusion

This article has holistically examined two decades of research focusing on British Asians and football. The voices presented in the literature, and this article, can help football followers and key stakeholders critically understand the barriers that British Asian communities encounter. Although the literature may be considered detailed and expansive, there are some caveats that require further investigation, while some groups have been ignored. It would be useful for future scholars to research the experiences of British Asian females in male and female football spaces. It could be argued that future work should begin to focus specifically on particular South Asian diasporas as each community encounters a different experience. While Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi groups have been investigated, Tamils have remained

overlooked and future researchers should attempt to explore Tamil football histories and experiences.

Although the research of Bains and Patel, Burdsey and Ratna is comprehensive, these studies rely on primary data which is, in some cases, over 20 years old. Football changes, communities change, and cultures advance and mutate. While Bains and Patel, and to some extent Burdsey, were exploring the experiences of second generation British Asian groups, my research has managed to offer a contemporaneous account of British Asian football communities. For example, playing opportunities were minimal at the turn of the twenty-first century, however, there are more grassroots structures available for British Asian groups than ever before (further action is needed though). The 'Asians in football' movement has blossomed and gathered momentum in recent years. The FAs Bringing Opportunities to Communities Plan, Chelsea's 'Asian Star' and the biennial Asian Football Awards are cases in point; and the participants included in my study are aware of these developments. The oral testimonies allow participants a platform to critically reflect on their successes and failures, and advocate new ideas and routes for inclusion. These calls for action have been captured and presented in this article.

In sum, my decade long investigation into British Asians and football draws on the experiences of players, managers, coaches, scouts, fans, campaign group leaders, key stakeholders, etc. Using CRT, the British Asian voice has been empowered by highlighting the most pressing barriers while the calls for action are the consensus views among research participants. Oral testimonies reflected on incidents of verbal and concealed racism; participants spoke about their isolation from mainstream

structures; others highlighted that football opportunities in predominantly British Asian environments are minimal; some emphasised that role models are required to help 'ignite' self-belief; and many interviewees argued that creating and developing coaches at grassroots level is fundamental. Hylton⁸⁰ emphasises the power of storytelling as it allows us the opportunity to hear and understand the force of such voices. Over time, strong and persuasive arguments for change can emerge out of the weight of evidence from their mutual narrative. Counter stories challenge hegemonic metanarratives and inform anti-racist agendas and action. The counter stories presented within this article add to the ongoing conversation regarding the exclusion of British Asians in football.

Notes

¹ Robinson, 'Tackling the anxieties of the English: searching for the nation through football', 226.

² Bains and Johal, *Corner Flags and Corner Shops: The Asian Football Experience*.

³ Burdsey, *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*.

⁴ Kilvington, *British Asians, Exclusion and the Football Industry*.

⁵ Bandyopadhyay, 'Race, Nation and Sport: Footballing Nationalism in Colonial Calcutta', 2.

⁶ Kilvington, *The "Asian Frame", Football and the Sport Media*.

⁷ Kapadia, "The Story of Indian Football, 1889-2000", 17.

⁸ Bandyopadhyay, 'Race, Nation and Sport: Footballing Nationalism in Colonial Calcutta', 3

⁹ Kilvington, *The "Asian Frame", Football and the Sport Media*, 204.

¹⁰ Burdsey, *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*, 38.

¹¹ Bains and Patel, *Asians Can't Play Football*.

¹² Bains and Johal, *Corner Flags and Corner Shops: The Asian Football Experience*.

¹³ Ladson-Billings, "Just What Is Critical Race Theory, and What Is It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?", 24.

¹⁴ Burdsey, *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*, 9.

¹⁵ Bains and Johal, *Corner Flags and Corner Shops: The Asian Football Experience*.

¹⁶ Johal, "Playing their own game: A South Asian football experience".

¹⁷ Burdsey, 'One of the lads? Dual ethnicity and assimilated ethnicities in the careers of British Asian professional footballer'.

¹⁸ Burdsey, *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*, 71.

¹⁹ Cante, *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team*.

²⁰ Johal, "Playing their own game: A South Asian football experience".

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- ²¹ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.
- ²² Burdsey, 'Obstacle race? "Race", racism and the recruitment of British Asian professional footballer'.
- ²³ Kilvington and Price, 'British Asians, overt racism and Islamophobia in English football'.
- ²⁴ Bradbury, 'From racial exclusions to new inclusion: Black and minority ethnic participation in football clubs in the East Midlands of England'.
- ²⁵ Bradbury, 'Racisms, Resistance and New Youth Inclusions: The Socio-Historical Development and Shifting Focus of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Football Clubs in Leicester'.
- ²⁶ Kilvington, *British Asians, Exclusion and the Football Industry*.
- ²⁷ Bains and Patel, *Asians Can't Play Football*.
- ²⁸ Asians in Football Forum, *Asians Can Play Football*.
- ²⁹ Burdsey, *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Kilvington, 'British Asians, Covert Racism and Exclusion in English Professional Football'.
- ³³ Zamudio et al., *Critical Race Theory Matters: Education and Ideology*, 3.
- ³⁴ Hylton, 'How a turn to critical race theory can contribute to our understanding of "race", racism and anti-racism in sport', 22.
- ³⁵ Kilvington, 'British Asians, Covert Racism and Exclusion in English Professional Football'.
- ³⁶ Bains and Johal, *Corner Flags and Corner Shops: The Asian Football Experience*.
- ³⁷ Burdsey, *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*.
- ³⁸ Kilvington, 'British Asians, Covert Racism and Exclusion in English Professional Football'.
- ³⁹ Kilvington, *British Asians, Exclusion and the Football Industry*.
- ⁴⁰ Ratna, "A 'Fair Game'? British-Asian Females' Experiences of Racism in Women's Football".
- ⁴¹ Kilvington, *British Asians, Exclusion and the Football Industry*.
- ⁴² Burdsey, *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*.
- ⁴³ Johal, "Playing their own game: A South Asian football experience".
- ⁴⁴ Kilvington and Price, 'British Asians, overt racism and Islamophobia in English football'.
- ⁴⁵ Kilvington, *British Asians, Exclusion and the Football Industry*.
- ⁴⁶ Bains and Patel, *Asians Can't Play Football*.
- ⁴⁷ Burdsey, 'Obstacle race? "Race", racism and the recruitment of British Asian professional footballer'.
- ⁴⁸ Kilvington, 'British Asians, Covert Racism and Exclusion in English Professional Football'.
- ⁴⁹ Kilvington, *The "Asian Frame", Football and the Sport Media*.
- ⁵⁰ Kilvington, *British Asians, Exclusion and the Football Industry*.
- ⁵¹ Bains and Patel, *Asians Can't Play Football*.
- ⁵² Kilvington, *British Asians, Exclusion and the Football Industry*.
- ⁵³ Saeed and Kilvington 'British-Asians and racism within contemporary English football'.
- ⁵⁴ Hoberman, Darwin's Athletes: *How Sport has Damaged Black America and Presented the Myth of Race*, 5.

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- ⁵⁵ Back et al., *The Changing Face of Football: Racism, Identity and Multiculture in the English Game*, 179.
- ⁵⁶ Denscombe, *The good research guide: for small-scale social research projects*, 16.
- ⁵⁷ Burrell and Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Observational Analysis: Elements of the Sociology of Corporate Life*, 1979.
- ⁵⁸ Burdsey, *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*, 9.
- ⁵⁹ Gobo, "Ethnography", 22.
- ⁶⁰ Hylton, 'Race' and sport: *critical race theory*, 33.
- ⁶¹ Bains and Patel, *Asians Can't Play Football*.
- ⁶² Burdsey, *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*.
- ⁶³ Back et al., *The Changing Face of Football: Racism, Identity and Multiculture in the English Game*.
- ⁶⁴ Randhawa, "Marrying Passion with Professionalism: Examining the Future of British Asian Football", 240.
- ⁶⁵ Lusted, 'Playing games with "race": understanding resistance to "race" equality initiatives in English local football governance', 734.
- ⁶⁶ Randhawa, "Marrying Passion with Professionalism: Examining the Future of British Asian Football", 245.
- ⁶⁷ Bains and Patel, *Asians Can't Play Football*.
- ⁶⁸ McGuire et al., 'Young Asian males: social exclusion and social injustice in British professional football?'
- ⁶⁹ Randhawa, "Marrying Passion with Professionalism: Examining the Future of British Asian Football".
- ⁷⁰ Burdsey, *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*.
- ⁷¹ Lentin, *Racism and Anti-racism in Europe*, 250.
- ⁷² Randhawa, "Marrying Passion with Professionalism: Examining the Future of British Asian Football".
- ⁷³ Said, *Orientalism*.
- ⁷⁴ Kilvington, *British Asians, Exclusion and the Football Industry*.
- ⁷⁵ Coyle, *The Talent Code: Greatness isn't born, it's grown*.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., 106.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., 175.
- ⁷⁸ Farrington et al., *Race, Racism and Sports Journalism*.
- ⁷⁹ Burdsey, *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion*.
- ⁸⁰ Hylton, 'How a turn to critical race theory can contribute to our understanding of "race", racism and anti-racism in sport'.

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