

## The Activist-Lawyer: Sibghat Kadri, Anti-Racism, and the Struggle for Rights in Postwar Britain

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the career of Sibghat Kadri, the first Pakistani and first Asian Queen's Counsel in Britain, to argue that British Asian activist-lawyers were central to the making of anti-racist politics and policy in the postwar period. Despite four decades of legal and political work, Kadri remains marginal in academic accounts of British race relations and British Asian history. Drawing on archival sources, conference reports, legal documents, and community campaign materials, the article reconstructs Kadri's role in three linked arenas: courtroom struggles against institutional racism, cross-community organising through the Standing Conference of Pakistani Organisations (SCOPO) and allied bodies, and transnational campaigns over welfare, immigration, and nationality.

The article first situates Kadri's trajectory from Partition-era India 1947 and postcolonial Pakistan to the British bar, highlighting how experiences of colonial violence, migration, and everyday racism shaped his legal activism. It then analyses his interventions in high-profile cases, including the Bradford 12, to show how he used legal argument to expose racist violence and challenge the neutrality of British courts. Subsequent sections explore his leadership in campaigns around child benefit and dual nationality, demonstrating how he linked welfare rights to wider questions of belonging, citizenship, and state racism.

By foregrounding Kadri's work alongside that of organisations such as SCOPO, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI), and the Indian Workers' Association (IWA), the article re-centres British Asians as key actors in anti-racist struggles and argues that activist-lawyers were crucial brokers between grassroots mobilisation and formal political change.

**Keywords:** Sibghat Kadri, Activist lawyer, British Asian, Anti-racism, Bradford 12, Race, Law and Justice, Welfare and Child benefits, British nationality and citizenship, SCOPO (Standing conference of Pakistani Organisations), Immigration and Postcolonial Britain

### INTRODUCTION

Sibghat Kadri, Queen's Counsel (QC), was a pivotal but under-recognised figure in Britain's postwar anti-racist movement. Across four decades, he combined legal practice with political organising, helping to reshape both the bar and the broader terrain of race relations. He became the first Pakistani and first Asian Queen's Counsel in 1969, established the Society of Black Lawyers, founded the inaugural multi-racial chambers, and spearheaded campaigns for immigration rights and welfare entitlements as President of SCOPO [1]. Yet he appears more often in newspaper obituaries than in scholarly accounts, and his contributions are largely absent from the dominant narratives of British Asian history and British anti-racism [2].

The historiography of British race relations has tended to foreground Afro-Caribbean activism, state policy responses, and white anti-racist organisations such as the Anti-Nazi League, often marginalising the contributions of British Asian activists and the distinctive forms of organising they developed. Where Asian activism is acknowledged, it is frequently treated as separate from broader anti-racist coalitions or reduced to community self-defence movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The role of legal professionals in these struggles has

received even less sustained attention, even though lawyers like Kadri functioned as crucial intermediaries between grassroots campaigns, immigrant communities, and formal political institutions.

This article argues that Kadri's career illuminates the centrality of activist-lawyers to anti-racist struggles in Britain, and it shows how legal expertise, community organising, and transnational campaigning intersected in battles over welfare, immigration, and citizenship. By examining Kadri's trajectory from the courtroom to cross-community coalitions and transnational campaigns, the article demonstrates that British Asians were not peripheral but central to shaping anti-racist politics in this period. Moreover, it contends that activist-lawyers were vital brokers who translated everyday experiences of racism into legal claims and political demands, challenging institutional racism while building the coalitions necessary for structural change.

The article proceeds in four main sections. First, it traces Kadri's formation as an activist-lawyer, from his experiences of Partition, colonial repression, and racist violence to his entry into the British legal profession. Second, it examines how he transformed the profession itself by opening chambers to Black and Asian barristers and establishing legal networks that connected anti-racist organising across ethnic lines. Third, it analyses his courtroom interventions, focusing on the Bradford 12 trial as a key site where legal argument exposed racist violence and challenged judicial neutrality. Finally, it explores Kadri's leadership in two major campaigns—over child benefit reform and dual nationality—to demonstrate how welfare and immigration struggles were linked to wider questions of belonging and citizenship in postwar Britain.

#### **FROM PARTITION TO THE BAR: FORMATION OF AN ACTIVIST-LAWYER**

Kadri's trajectory from colonial India to the English bar was marked by displacement, repression, and racial violence, all of which informed his later activism. Born in India, he moved with his family to Karachi after Partition, sharing cramped accommodation with his parents and seven siblings and witnessing the upheavals produced by colonial withdrawal [3]. The experience of Partition—the mass violence, forced migration, and communal divisions that accompanied the creation of Pakistan and India—left deep scars and shaped his understanding of how state power could generate and legitimise violence against minority communities.

As a student in Pakistan, Kadri's dissent against Prime Minister General Ayub Khan resulted in a brief spell in prison, sharpening his awareness of authoritarianism and the uses of law as a tool of repression [4]. This early politicisation, rooted in postcolonial struggles over democracy and state power, would later inform his critique of British legal institutions and their claims to neutrality. After arriving in Britain in 1960 to visit his terminally ill sister, Kadri opted to remain and financed his legal studies by working as a postal worker, clerk, and waiter [5].

It was during this period that Kadri experienced the racial violence that would galvanise his determination to use law as a weapon against racism. A racist assault by a white customer who smashed a glass into his face left him hospitalised for three weeks with permanent scars [6]. The customer, who was drunk, had refused to pay his restaurant bill and attacked Kadri when challenged. This incident, along with numerous other encounters with everyday racism and racist violence, crystallised Kadri's resolve to pursue a legal career focused on defending the rights of immigrant and minority communities. His pursuit of justice was not abstract; it was rooted in lived experience and a recognition that the law, while often deployed to exclude and oppress, could also be mobilised as a tool of resistance.

Kadri's entry into the legal profession was itself an act of defiance against a bar that remained overwhelmingly white and elite. His appointment as Queen's Counsel in 1969 was

not merely a personal achievement but a symbolic challenge to institutional racism within the legal establishment. As the first Pakistani and first Asian QC, he occupied a position that had been closed to minorities and used that platform to champion anti-racist causes both within and beyond the courtroom.

### **TRANSFORMING THE LEGAL PROFESSION: COALITIONS AND NETWORKS**

Kadri used his position within the legal profession not simply to advance his own career but to widen access and challenge institutional racism at the bar. He established the first multi-racial chambers, opening doors to Asian and Black barristers who had previously been excluded from legal practice [7]. This was a direct challenge to the informal exclusions and "old boys' networks" that had kept the bar white and privileged. By creating spaces where minority barristers could practise and develop their careers, Kadri fundamentally altered the composition and culture of the profession.

In collaboration with Rudy Narayan of the West Indian Standing Conference, Kadri established the Afro-Asian and Caribbean Law Association, an organisation of Black solicitors and barristers dedicated to combating racism within the British legal system [8]. This body represented a significant attempt to build cross-ethnic solidarity among legal professionals, linking Asian and Afro-Caribbean lawyers in shared struggles against discrimination and exclusion. The association provided support, advocacy, and a collective voice for minority lawyers, while also offering legal services to communities facing racist violence, discriminatory policing, and unjust immigration enforcement.

Kadri's close association with Narayan—who had successfully defended Roy Sawh against charges of racial incitement—illustrates the broader networks of collaboration between Afro-Caribbean and Asian activists during this period [9]. These were not fleeting alliances, but sustained partnerships rooted in shared analysis of state racism and a commitment to building coalitions capable of challenging it. The founding of the Society of Black Lawyers further institutionalised these networks, creating a platform for minority legal professionals to organise collectively and intervene in policy debates around race, policing, and justice.

Beyond professional organising, Kadri was actively involved in broader anti-racist campaigns and coalitions. He served as an "immigrant spokesman" for the BBC Urdu Language Service and participated in the 1964 Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD), established following Martin Luther King Jr.'s visit to Britain [10]. His activism was not confined to legal arenas but extended into media, community organising, and political mobilisation, reflecting a holistic approach to anti-racist struggle that linked formal legal advocacy with grassroots activism.

In January 1975, Kadri famously intruded upon the first Black People's conference in Britain alongside IWA members Jagmohan Joshi, Avtar Johal, Tony Huq from the Bangladeshi Workers' Association (BWA), and members of the Akali Dal [11]. They protested that they had not received invitations despite representing significant Asian religious and regional organisations. This direct action epitomised Kadri's rejection of the marginalisation of Asians within anti-racist spaces and his insistence that Asian voices be heard and Asian organisations recognised as equal partners in the struggle against racism. It demonstrated a willingness to confront exclusions even within progressive movements, asserting the right of British Asians to be central actors in anti-racist politics.

### **THE COURTROOM AS SITE OF ANTI-RACIST STRUGGLE: THE BRADFORD 12**

Kadri treated the courtroom as a political arena in which the racialised nature of both violence and justice could be publicly named and contested. His legal practice focused on defending those accused in complex immigration cases and unprecedented criminal trials, often involving defendants who faced systemic bias and discriminatory treatment [12]. Among the

many high-profile cases he handled, the Bradford 12 trial stands out as emblematic of his approach to legal activism and his understanding of the courtroom as a site of ideological struggle.

The Bradford 12 were young Asian men charged with conspiracy to make petrol bombs in response to escalating racist violence in Bradford during the early 1980s. The context for the trial was crucial: Asian communities in Bradford had endured a wave of racist murders, arson attacks, and assaults, while police investigations frequently failed to acknowledge the racial motivation behind these crimes or to protect Asian residents [13]. The defendants argued that they had acted in self-defence, preparing to protect their community in the absence of adequate state protection. The trial thus became a public reckoning with both racist violence and the failure of the British state to address it.

In defending Ahmed Mansoor, one of the Bradford 12, Kadri challenged the very composition of the jury, asserting that the Leeds trial lacked the presence of an Asian juror and that the defendants would argue they had "no chance" in what appeared to be a rigged process [14]. He informed the judge: "This case stems from racial violence directed at the Asian community in Bradford, specifically the murders of Asians and the arson of their residences. I will demonstrate the existence of racist violence in Bradford—an experience beyond the comprehension of any jury in Leeds" [15].

These statements were more than legal technicalities; they were explicit challenges to the supposed neutrality of British justice. Kadri insisted that a legal system which failed to reflect the diversity of the communities it judged, and which remained blind to the realities of racist violence, could not deliver fair outcomes. By naming the absence of Asian jurors and linking it to broader patterns of exclusion and bias, he exposed the structural racism embedded within judicial institutions.

For the defendants, Kadri's arguments offered more than legal representation; they signalled recognition, solidarity, and the presence of an older generation of Asian activists willing to stand with younger militants in the dock. His presence in court demonstrated continuity between generations of anti-racist struggle and affirmed that the defendants' actions—however controversial—arose from legitimate grievances and the failure of the state to protect Asian lives. In the words of the defendants, Kadri "came to represent safety, legitimacy, and belonging" in an otherwise hostile system [16].

The Bradford 12 were ultimately acquitted, a victory that had profound symbolic and political significance. The trial and its outcome challenged dominant narratives that portrayed young Asian men as threats to public order, instead framing them as communities defending themselves against racist violence. It also drew national attention to the scale and severity of anti-Asian violence in Bradford and other cities, forcing a public reckoning with issues that police and politicians had long ignored or downplayed.

Kadri's role in the Bradford 12 trial was part of a wider pattern of legal activism. He represented victims and families in cases involving racist murders and arson, including the 1985 firebombing of the Kassam family home in Seven Kings, Ilford, where a mother and her three children died [17]. In the aftermath of that atrocity, Kadri participated in public meetings and campaigns to denounce the police's failure to investigate the attack as a racially motivated crime, holding the state accountable for its complicity through inaction [18]. His activism in these cases linked courtroom advocacy with community organising, using legal argument to amplify grassroots demands for justice and recognition.

### SCOPO, WELFARE, AND THE POLITICS OF REDISTRIBUTION

As President of the Standing Conference of Pakistani Organisations (SCOPO), Kadri worked closely with other immigrant organisations on issues ranging from immigration law and worker exploitation to racial discrimination. His involvement in welfare campaigns revealed how struggles over redistribution were deeply racialised and how anti-racist organising necessarily engaged with questions of economic justice and social entitlement.

Welfare reform in the mid-1970s became a crucial battleground in which Kadri and allied organisations exposed the racialised nature of economic austerity. Before 1977, the British government supported children through two systems: the child tax allowance, paid in the breadwinner's pay cheque, and the family allowance, paid to mothers via the post office [19]. These two schemes were merged into Child Benefit in April 1977, paid directly to mothers (and sometimes fathers) through the post office. While presented as a rationalisation of the welfare system, the phaseout of the child tax allowance and the introduction of Child Benefit made it harder for low-wage workers to support their families, particularly those with dependants living abroad [20].

The change disproportionately harmed low-paid Asian and Black workers with large families and children overseas, who continued to pay the same taxes as white workers but lost key entitlements. Moreover, Britain maintained reciprocal benefit agreements with countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Norway, and Canada—whose citizens could claim benefits for children abroad—while migrants from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, the Caribbean, and other regions were excluded [21]. This differential treatment was justified on economic grounds as a measure to reduce public spending and prevent alleged fraudulent claims for children abroad that did not exist [22]. Yet the policy was deeply racialised, penalising hard-working Asian and Black Commonwealth citizens who paid the same taxes as white workers but were denied equal benefits.

Kadri and SCOPO framed these changes not as neutral budgetary measures but as discriminatory policies that contradicted the spirit of the Race Relations Acts. In a letter to Prime Minister James Callaghan, Kadri wrote: "In order to maintain British standards of fair play and to avoid the type of discrimination that the Race Relations Acts are supposed to eradicate, we suggest these tax allowances be retained"[23]. The letter was also sent to David Steel and Margaret Thatcher, leaders of the Liberal and Conservative Parties, respectively, demonstrating Kadri's willingness to engage across the political spectrum and to hold the government accountable by appealing to its own anti-discrimination legislation [24].

The "Child benefits for all" campaign brought together SCOPO, JCWI, the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), and other organisations in a coordinated effort to restore child benefits for overseas children of immigrant families in the UK [25]. John Plummer from JCWI produced a booklet titled *Divided and Deprived*, which highlighted the consequences of abolishing the child tax allowance for overseas children and refuted government justifications for the policy [26]. The booklet was sent to every politician in Parliament and followed up with correspondence to ensure it had been read, demonstrating the campaign's multi-layered approach that combined grassroots mobilisation with targeted lobbying [27].

After sustained pressure, the government eventually conceded to postpone the abolition of the child tax allowance for an interim period "to give the government time to fully review the various suggestions," allowing child tax to be claimed for migrant workers' children living overseas [28]. This was a limited but significant victory, restoring for a time the right to claim allowances for children abroad and affirming that racialised welfare restrictions could be challenged and reversed through organised campaigning.

Yet the victory was also temporary and partial, achieved in an increasingly hostile climate. The mid-1970s economic crisis and rising anti-immigrant sentiment shaped government policy, with immigration restrictions and welfare retrenchment increasingly linked

as strategies for managing Britain's political and economic problems. The 1977 Labour White Paper on immigration maintained restrictions on family reunification and made it harder for dependants to join their families in Britain, while changes to child benefits confirmed that immigrant workers were expected to pay the same taxes as white workers but could not claim equal benefits [29]. These measures disproportionately affected low-paid Asian and Black workers, deepening inequality and exclusion while rendering them as scapegoats for Britain's economic difficulties.

Kadri's leadership in the child benefit campaign demonstrated that anti-racist organising necessarily engaged with questions of welfare, taxation, and redistribution. By linking these issues to immigration law and citizenship, he and his allies revealed how racism operated not only through overt violence but through the differentiated allocation of social rights and resources.

### **NATIONALITY, BELONGING, AND TRANSNATIONAL CAMPAIGNS**

Changes to nationality law in the late 1970s and early 1980s forced many Indian migrants in Britain into a precarious position, revealing again how legal status, race, and belonging were entwined. The British Nationality Act of 1981 classified individuals in Britain without a direct UK connection as "British Overseas Citizens," a status that did not confer the right of abode [30]. At the same time, Indian law continued to prohibit dual nationality, meaning that migrants who naturalised as British risked losing voting rights, property ownership, and visa-free entry in India, while those who remained solely Indian citizens lacked social security entitlements in Britain and feared deportation for minor infractions [31].

This placed Indian migrants in an impossible bind: renounce Indian citizenship and forfeit vital rights in their country of origin or retain it and remain vulnerable in Britain. Pakistan, by contrast, allowed dual nationality, highlighting the differential impact of these legal frameworks across South Asian communities [32]. The situation demanded a transnational response, one that engaged both the British and Indian states and linked immigration status to welfare rights and migrants' sense of secure membership in Britain.

Kadri, working alongside organisations such as the IWA and JCWI, helped press both governments on these issues. The IWA dual nationality assembly at Digbeth's Civic Hall on 12 October 1980 attracted 80 delegates from 35 Indian organisations, with K. Gainth, Indian Assistant High Commissioner; Ian Martin from JCWI; and Rudy Narayan of the West Indian Standing Conference in attendance [33]. Although unwell, Kadri sent greetings, and the Assistant High Commissioner agreed to convey the conference proceedings to India to advocate for dual nationality for Indians in Britain [34].

The campaign did not achieve full dual nationality, but it secured important gains. In 1999, the Indian government launched the Person of Indian Origin (PIO) card, replaced in 2005 by the Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) card [35]. These cards conferred restricted rights to Indian nationals residing abroad, including property ownership, though they did not permit voting or constitute full dual nationality. Without the sustained pressure from the IWA and its affiliates, many Indians in Britain would have faced arbitrary restrictions, challenges regarding property ownership and inheritance, and the constant threat of deportation.

The dual nationality campaign illustrated the necessity of coalition-building across ethnic and organisational lines. The presence of Rudy Narayan and white anti-racist organisations at the Digbeth assembly demonstrated that West Indian and white activists recognised the issue as part of a shared struggle against discriminatory British immigration and nationality laws. Kadri's collaboration with Narayan—evident in their joint founding of the Afro-Asian and Caribbean Law Association—underscored the importance of professional legal networks in sustaining these coalitions and translating grassroots demands into formal legal and diplomatic interventions.

Kadri's involvement in the dual nationality campaign also highlighted the transnational dimensions of anti-racist struggle. British Asians were not simply passive subjects of British law but active agents who mobilised across borders, engaging their countries of origin and leveraging international networks to challenge exclusionary policies. This transnational activism troubled the boundaries of national citizenship and belonging, insisting that migrants' rights and identities extended beyond the territorial limits of the British state.

### CONCLUSION

Sibghat Kadri's career as an activist-lawyer reveals how struggles over race in postwar Britain were waged simultaneously in the courtroom, the welfare office, and the transnational space between Britain and South Asia. As a barrister and later QC, he challenged the supposed neutrality of British legal institutions, insisting that the violence directed at Black and Asian communities and the biases embedded in juries, policing, and prosecution be publicly recognised. His interventions in cases such as the Bradford 12 demonstrated that legal advocacy could expose institutional racism and affirm solidarity with defendants positioned as internal enemies of the state.

Beyond the courtroom, Kadri's leadership in organisations such as SCOPO, and his collaboration with JCWI, CPAG, the IWA, and other groups, shows that legal expertise was mobilised in campaigns over welfare and nationality that reshaped the material conditions of migrant life. The child benefit and dual nationality campaigns connected questions of redistribution, family life, and citizenship, revealing that racism operated not only through overt violence but through the differentiated allocation of social rights. These campaigns won only partial and often temporary victories, yet they established important precedents and articulated a language of rights that would inform later struggles.

Attending to Kadri's work also requires a rethinking of the geographies of British anti-racism. Rather than treating Black and Asian struggles as separate or sequential, his collaborations with figures such as Rudy Narayan and his participation in Afro-Asian and Caribbean legal networks highlight the centrality of cross-ethnic coalitions. Activist-lawyers like Kadri functioned as brokers between grassroots organisations, immigrant communities, and the state, translating everyday grievances into legal claims and political demands.

The relative silence about Kadri in the academic literature is therefore not merely a biographical omission. It reflects a broader tendency to understate the role of British Asians and of legal professionals in shaping anti-racist politics. By placing Kadri at the centre of the narrative, this article argues for a more expansive understanding of British anti-racism—one that recognises the law as a contested site, acknowledges the importance of welfare and nationality campaigns, and foregrounds the transnational and coalitional character of these struggles. Such a reorientation not only restores a missing figure to the historical record; it also offers analytical tools for understanding contemporary battles over immigration, welfare, and citizenship in Britain today.

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