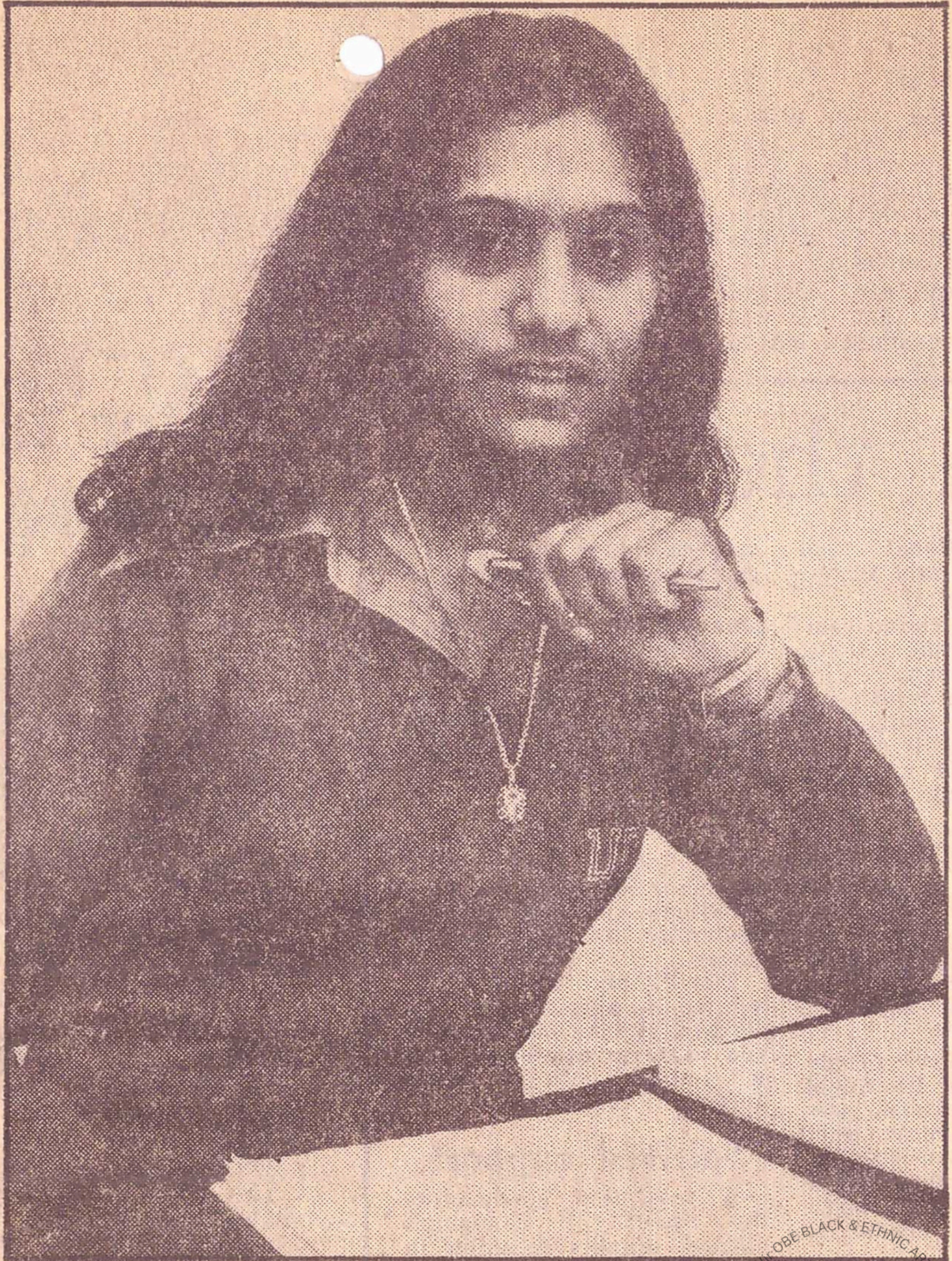




Miss Parminder Vir, Southern Co-ordinator of the Midlands Advisory Service, who is about to bring a little colour into our lives with her Directory of Ethnic Minority Arts.

GLC
1981-1986
Working for London
archive.parmindervir.com

PARMINDER VIR FOR THE GLC
1981-1986
WORKING FOR LONDON
ARCHIVE

Lady in search of new British ethnic artists

April 27th 79.

Miss Parminder Vir has no illusions about the importance of her work.

"Only when your stomach is full do you think about culture," she told me. Nevertheless, she feels that there are now enough full stomachs in the Midlands for a need to exist in the arts.

That need, she thinks, is for contact between new-British and native British in community arts development.

Miss Vir, a diminutive 23-year-old Punjabi, has just completed a four-year B.Ed course at Dartford College, Kent, where she specialised in physical education. She has the lithe grace of a gymnast, and no doubt would have found her way into the classroom, had not the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation funded her research into the creation of an Ethnic Minority Arts Directory which will keep her in Birmingham for two years.

Her work is complex, since although the proposed directory will eventually provide a shop window for emerging talent among the immigrant community, she has to promote an interest among the artists themselves first through locating the various dance and drama groups, weavers, embroiderers and so on, then offering encouragement and guidance as their significant contact with funding sources.

"I provide a link between young and old in all the different communities which flourish in a random sense between Coventry, say, and

Ethnic minority arts groups, long-standing Cinderellas of the grants system, may soon be taking a more significant role in the community. RICHARD EDMONDS talks to Parminder Vir about her work on a new directory of Ethnic Minority Arts in the West Midlands.

Stoke-on-Trent, or Birmingham and Leamington. I visit dancers, and other performing artists, discuss future venues with them and then assess the quality of their work," said Miss Vir, who began her mammoth compilation at the end of February.

A problem which lies at the source of low-level ethnic arts support (which Miss Vir is concerned to straighten out) is the lack of effective contact between the host community and minority groups, who are rarely given an opportunity to display their modes of expression or develop a voice of their own.

Black Expression, for example, is an up-and-coming dance group which would benefit from a series of funded performances at a prominent West Midlands venue. But Miss Vir fears that such performances are unlikely to be forthcoming. Without applications made to the appropriate bodies, a state of unawareness can exist where no money from local authorities is made available through ignorance of need rather than through neglect.

There is also the fear that providing financial assistance for ethnic minority arts might be misinterpreted as racism in reverse. This is false and Miss Vir would be the first to point out that many ethnic

minority groups constituted from various cultures, produce an exemplary racial mix which succeeds through a common aim which is frequently to make music.

"I think there is a need for these various groups to become familiar with groups involved in a similar activity," she told me. "With the host community in Britain, those needs do not arise, since major subsidies are granted for arts development. I would like to see an informative directory which says (apart from listing the groups themselves) who one turns to for help or where support is to be found. That kind of information is unfamiliar to many of the new-British."

A report made to the Arts Council of Great Britain by Naseem Khan, *The Arts Britain Ignores*, puts the case squarely on the line and Ms Khan's plea for recognition and support is something which Miss Vir takes to heart.

"Ethnic minority arts are an energetic but struggling sub culture," wrote Ms. Khan. "Since little encouragement is given to them to expand, the problems they face are those of neglect; lack of premises to rehearse, lack of comparable back-up that is afforded to equivalent native British groups, lack of acceptance

within the arts structure and lack of exposure. Increased cost of travelling, transport, costumes and premises, cannot but sap the dedication of such groups. Lack of outlets means the work is kept at a self-contained amateur level."

It is a fact that we never hear of many a group who may eventually lose heart and fall by the wayside. But is that not also the case with native British talent which is likely in many cases to remain at an amateur level never qualifying for subsidy?

"It is a question of holding together," says Miss Vir, who makes many contacts through religious groups within the West Midlands. "I have a friend who works in Oxford as a midwife, but in the evenings she performs Indian classical dance. She is very good indeed and I would like more people to be aware of her talents."

Several Polish people to whom I spoke in Birmingham felt no need for subsidy.

To say that urban subsidy is lavish would, of course, be quite false. Where are the steel band sessions and the well-advertised Punjabi bhangra dance groups, of which there are several in the West Midlands? Indian classical dance and its music is worth more than the memory of Ravi Shankar nowadays. Through excursions into schools and local community centres, Miss Vir intends to provide a picture of music, dance and drama among artists, of Asian, East European and West Indian origin. It is a project long overdue.