

Baroness Flather obituary

British-Indian politician who became the first Asian woman to receive a peerage and had a reputation for ‘saying the unsayable’

Hailing from a distinguished family in Lahore, Shreela Flather achieved a number of firsts in the United Kingdom. She was the UK’s first female local councillor from an ethnic minority, the first Asian female mayor and the first Asian woman to sit in the House of Lords. Though initially diffident, she became noted for “saying the unsayable”, including about south Asians marrying their cousins and some Muslim men having multiple wives and partners.

Having started out as a teacher and community activist in Maidenhead in the 1960s, she cemented her reputation as a public figure by creating the first memorial to non-white Commonwealth forces in the two world wars.

She was the first parliamentarian to wear a sari on the floor of the House when it was unusual for ethnic minority women to hold public office. She had assumed like so many that she should join the Labour Party but, receiving no encouragement, was taken up by local Conservatives and found it her natural home, especially after regular “discussions” with her then Marxist son.

Ten years later, as the elected mayor of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, she came to know Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, who were fellow residents. She shared a mischievous sense of humour with the prince and once suggested to him that the royal couple pay rates to help with the borough’s budget problems.

When she entered the Lords as a Conservative peer in 1990 Lord Pitt of Hampstead was the only other peer from an ethnic minority background and Baroness Flather wondered if she would be accepted. But a decade

later, she recalled: “It was the first institution I had ever entered in this country where I was treated as a person, a friend and a colleague.”

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Flather was an active peer who frequently spoke out on women's rights, immigration and assisted dying. In a debate on the latter issue she declared that she would support her disabled husband if he wanted to end his life. She dismissed private appeals from Lord Alton of Liverpool that she should try palliative care and hospice provision.

Despite her support for ethnic communities, she opposed political correctness ("we need it like a hole in the head") and angered some community leaders with her views. She claimed that some immigrant groups (notably from Pakistan and Bangladesh) had many children to claim welfare benefits, and she wanted full child benefits to be limited to the first two offspring. She [opposed the use of sharia](#) in the UK and the practice by some Muslims of marrying first cousins because of the risk of birth defects, and urged the adoption of DNA tests to prove that would-be couples were not cousins.

Calling for minorities to adapt to British values, she argued against the halal method of preparing food. She found herself attacked on all sides, labelled a racist for calling on immigrants to adapt to the British way of life but also spat at when she first went up to speak at the Conservative Party conference. She was also ahead of her time in describing the police as "institutionally racist".

Flather's services were much in demand. She served on the Race Relations Board (1973-78), the Commission for Racial Equality and the Social Security Advisory Committee (1987-90). From 1987 to 1990, she was also a British representative on the Economic and Social Committee of the European Community and held senior posts in organisations involved in refugee, community, race relations, policing and prison work.

Despite holding many socially conservative views, she was not an easy member of the Conservative Party. She resigned the whip in 1998, when

William Hague sacked Lord Cranborne as leader of the Tory peers after their disagreement over plans for reform of the Lords. She was piqued to find fellow peers had not followed suit, as had been agreed.

Having resumed the Tory whip, she resigned a second time in 2008. She felt that her views were too often ignored. Denied frontbench duties, she was free to speak her mind and sat as a crossbencher.

Born in 1934, Shreela Rai was the daughter of Aftab and Krishna Rai, one of the most prominent Hindu families in Lahore, then part of pre-partition India and now in Pakistan. The Rais were prosperous, living in a spacious house with servants and a large shaded garden. Their status and affluence derived in part from her great-grandfather, Sir Ganga Ram, a famous engineer and philanthropist at the turn of the century in British India. However, partition in 1947 dashed the family's hopes of Lahore remaining in India, when it was given to Pakistan. The family fled, leaving behind the house, factories and land, and started again in Delhi, while Shreela flew to the United States to stay with her student brother.

When her father was appointed Indian ambassador to Brazil in 1948, the 14-year-old Shreela accompanied him. The experience did much to develop her self-confidence and gregariousness. She was schooled in Buenos Aires, where she was befriended by Eva Perón. In India, she loved her visits to the hill station at Shimla where she could watch the latest films and skate and ride. Having spread her wings, her return to a girls' school in India was a disappointment.



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In 1952 she began studying law at University College London (of which she later became an honorary fellow) but interrupted her studies in the same year to marry Paul de Bernier. He was a dashing captain in the British Army and later the manager of a travel company. Both families disapproved of the match and her father was the only member who attended the wedding. The marriage was not a success and ended in divorce. The couple had two sons, who survive her: Paul has worked variously as a journalist, Labour politician and academic at Oxford; Marcus is a professor at the University of East Anglia.

When Shreela returned to England from India in 1963 to complete her degree, she was a single mother with two small boys. Initially, they lived in a small bedsit in Earls Court where she imposed a strict regime. Paul recalled that she expected them to help with cleaning and “was keen that my brother and I learnt many ‘skills’, such as cooking, ironing, and sewing, even crocheting”. Life improved in 1966, when she married the barrister Gary Flather, who later became a deputy High Court judge and recorder.

He developed multiple sclerosis in his early forties, the first signs appearing when he was skiing in Chamonix. He became dependent on a wheelchair and a carer, and his wife had to help him to bed each night.

Rather than practise law, Flather’s awareness of the disadvantages suffered by Indian immigrants who could not speak English led her to teach English in schools. While serving as the mayor of Windsor and Maidenhead she even took a girls’ school to court for imposing uniform rules that she argued discriminated against Asian pupils. In 1983 the family home was attacked by the White Defence League when a lead pipe was hurled through the kitchen window — it missed Paul by inches. Slogans daubed on the house attacked Gary as a “traitor to his race”.

The couple loved to travel and were accompanied on cruises by Gary's carer. Shreela relaxed by swimming and occasionally using an exercise bike "when I'm feeling virtuous".

After the death of her husband ([obituary, October 21, 2017](#)), Flather lived alone and enjoyed the warm company of Mac, who had been Gary's support dog.

She was most proud of organising and raising the millions needed to build the Memorial Gates on Constitution Hill near Buckingham Palace. It commemorated the contribution made in the two world wars by five million soldiers, sailors and airmen volunteers from the Indian subcontinent, Africa and the Caribbean. It is the venue for a moving annual ceremony of remembrance every Commonwealth Day, with high commissioners, Gurkhas and a military band.



Flather at the Eastern Eye Asian Business Awards in London in 2007

MATT CARDY/GETTY

Flather was committed to many cause groups, including the Humanists UK, the National Secular Society and the Voluntary Euthanasia Society. In 1996 she was appointed a trustee of Marie Stopes International, the non-governmental organisation providing sexual and reproductive health information and services. Describing herself as a “Hindu atheist”, she ceased to be a believer after studying the Holocaust.

A keen campaigner for women’s rights, she believed that “women should develop a second skin and become tough and strong but they don’t have to become hard”. Yet at times the forthright manner in which she expressed judgments about people and topics took colleagues aback, and some felt that she was too quick to take offence when her views were challenged.

She had a zest for life and a strong sense of humour — her laughter was instantly recognisable at social gatherings — and she loved to entertain. Over the years she acquired more than 400 saris, some of which were sold for charity and others given to relatives and friends.

According to Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws, the veteran human rights barrister and Labour peer: “Shreela was a force of nature and a great champion of women and girls. She never hesitated in speaking firmly to the male elders in minority communities about matters which inhibited others.”

Baroness Flather, British-Indian peer, was born on February 13, 1934. She died after a short illness on February 6, 2024, aged 89