Introduction to 2nd strand

Community creativity - dialogue between second and third generation on welfare and community involvement in the UK, from the 1970s-80s

In this strand we focussed on the emergence of the second generation of Bengali community activists and their entry into mainstream politics during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bengali community politics moved away from preoccupations with political struggles in Bangladesh which were discussed in the first strand and an alliance was forged between some of the first generation, such as Tassaduq Ahmed and Fakhruddin Ahmed, and the younger activists such as Rajonuddin Jalal, Noor Uddin Ahmed, Jamal Hassan, Akikur Rahman and Sunahwar Ali, for example, who are interviewed here and others such as Abbas Uddin and Ala Uddin. They seized the opportunity of gaining both access to the local political system and to state funding channelled through the local borough council, the Greater London Council (GLC) and the Inner London Educational Authority (ILEA).

They also saw the importance of building alliances with activists outside the Bengali community, such other 'Asians' from Hackney, Newham, Camden & Southall and those from the white majority such as Caroline Adams, Mark Adams, Peter East, Terry Fitzpatrick, John Newbegin and Clare Murphy. Through various 'redevelopment' schemes – the Spitalfields Project and BENTH are two examples discussed here – government money began to flow into Spitalfields and other wards where the Bengali population was rapidly expanding. Although it was mostly Bengali men who contributed to these developments, the interviews with Mithu Ghosh, Shila Thakor and Clare Murphy reveal the important role played by women and the influence of debates about women's rights and gender equality.

The interviews also look beyond this period of Bengali community formation and political mobilisation to events leading up to contemporary situation in Brick Lane. They point to the crucial economic and social changes – the decline of the garment industry, the expansion of the service sector, especially restaurants and shops, the emergence of a third generation where the highly educated pull away from those without prospects. In Spitalfields the impact of the 'global city' was felt by the gentrification of the conservation areas by rich white 'immigrants', the colonisation by high technology, advertising, media and the artistic sector, the arrival of City of London businesses and across the borough generally the transformation of the derelict docks in the south into the gleaming Manhattanesque landscape of Canary Wharf and the new housing for white middle class newcomers on the Isle of dogs and other southern localities. Brick Lane is still the centre of Bengali enterprise but it has become, a global icon, and attempts by local Bengali entrepreneurs and others to market the area's Banglatown - the East End's answer to the West End's Chinatown.

Another key development since the early 1980s has been the increasing importance of Islam. This has been driven by the arrival of wives and dependants during the 1980s and 1990s and debates about what beliefs and practices should be handed on to the very large third generation. The secular radicalism of those interviewed here has been challenged by Islamist critiques of western materialism and the British government's involvement in two Gulf conflicts etc. This critique is associated with the expanding influence of faith based organisations, and political developments back in Bangladesh.

Jamil Iqbal and John Eade

P.S. from John Eade: On a personal note I would like to express my pleasure in reading the interviews of those whom I met during my doctoral research on Bangladeshi community representation. I began the research at a crucial time - 1980. This was only two years after the murder of Altab Ali, which features so large in this strand of the project. I originally wanted to research the Bangladeshi involvement in the garment trade - another theme in this strand - but the factory owners were understandably suspicious and I made little progress. However, as one door closed another opened because many of them were eager to tell me about their role as community leaders and the thesis developed into a study of how Bangladeshi activists articulated the needs of Bangladeshi residents in the housing and education sectors. Between 1980 and 1986 I focussed on how this political struggle played out within Spitalfields and was fortunate enough to publish my thesis as a book – *The Politics of Community* – through Ashgate in 1989. I have continued to research and publish the issues outline above and have had the pleasure of working with some of the younger cohort of white and British Bangladeshi researchers such as Jamil Iqbal, Halima Begum, Isabelle Fremeaux, David Garbin and Georgie Wemyss. Inspired by this project I will ensure that *The Politics of Community* is reprinted with some chapters from my subsequent work and put on the Swadhinata website.

Interviewees Profile

Mr. Abdus Shukur
Age: 49
Interviewed: 21 March 2006
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal and Charlie Sen
Mr. Shukur was one of the founding members of Bangladesh Youth Movement (BYM) in the 70s and was its chairman and secretary. He was very much involved in Brick Lane in the 1970s in relation to the anti-racist movement and was chairman of the Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service (SHAPRS). At the time of the interview Mr. Shukur was a Labour Party councillor for the London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Rev. Aloke Biswas
Age: 61
Interviewed: 19 May 2006
Interviewer: Jamil Iqbal and Charlie Sen
The Reverend Biswas started his career as a social worker in the borough of Hackney in 1972. In the 1970s he was involved with the struggle against racism and he is still working as a social worker on a part time basis.

Mr. Akikur Rahman
Age: 53
Interviewed: 05 March 2006
Interviewer: Jamil Iqbal and Abdul Aziz
Mr. Rahman was a young political activist in the late 1970s. He was one of the organisers of the Black Solidarity Day in reprisal to the murder of Altab Ali - one of the biggest demonstrations in East London where 7,000 people marched from Whitechapel to 10 Downing Street. At the time of the interview Mr. Rahman was a Liberal Democrat Party's councillor for the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

Ms. Clare Murphy
Age: 59
Interviewed: 01 June 2006
Interviewer: Jamil Iqbal
Ms. Murphy came to Tower Hamlets in 1972 to work with Avenues Unlimited as a Community Development Worker. She challenged the local authority on such issues as housing, repairs etc and formed a group to do something about the Bengali housing problems. Currently, she works part-time with the YMCA.

Mr. Dan Jones
Age: 65
Interviewed: 06 March 2006
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal and Ansar Ahmed Ullah
Mr. Jones was a well-known youth and community worker and also the secretary of the Trade Union Council in Tower Hamlets. He struggled for the rights of ordinary Bengali people in and around Brick Lane. He has written, edited and illustrated a number of books. He has worked for Amnesty International UK as a campaigner and education officer for many years.

Mr. Derek Cox
Age: 68
Interviewed: 22 March 2006
Interviewer: Jamil Iqbal, Abdul Shahid and Shanaz Shahid.
Mr. Cox has been a youth and community worker for over 40 years and worked for Avenues Unlimited in Brick Lane. It employed the first full-time Asian youth worker, Ashok Basu Dev, in the early 1970s. Mr Cox was involved in setting up the Montefiore Community Centre. He now works for New Avenues, the successor to Avenues Unlimited.

Mr. Jamal Hasan
Interviewed: 07 April 2006
Interviewer: Jamil Iqbal
Mr. Hassan currently works at Camden Community Law Centre. He was a community and youth worker in the East End from 1972 until 1981. He was also involved with the Bangladesh Welfare Association (BWA). He became secretary of the coalition organisation which staged the demonstration from Brick Lane to Hyde Park.

Mr. John Eversley
Interviewed: 23 March 2006
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal and Charlie Sen
Mr. Eversley is a part-time university lecturer and managing director of a not-for-profit social research company. He has worked in Spitalfields from 1977 and was primarily concerned with adult community work but also had a lot of contact with youth organisations. He was involved in anti-racist struggle, partly through trade union movement and partly through community work.

Mr. John Newbigin
Age: 58
Interviewed: 21 March 2006
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal and Charlie Sen
In January 1976 Mr. Newbigin started working with Avenues Unlimited as a youth and community worker. He worked with Bengali youth in and around Brick Lane. Now he works as a freelance journalist and strategic consultant to the cultural industries.

Ms. Cathy Forrester (Peters)
Age: 54
Interviewed: 7 June 2006
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal, Riza Momin and Maliha Haque
Ms. Peters moved to the Chicksand Estate in 1962 when she was ten years old. As a local resident she experienced the problems faced by the Bengali community in Brick Lane. She stood up for the cause of the Bengali community in the late 1970s and was beaten, dragged and arrested by the police when a fight broke out between youth groups.

Rev. Kenneth Leech
Age: 66
Interviewed: 09 March 2006, Manchester
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal, Ansar Ahmed Ullah and Charlie Sen
The Reverend Leech has served as a director of the Runnymede Trust, a leading think-tank promoting ethnicity and cultural diversity. He was involved in the foundation of the Christian Socialist Movement and the Jubilee Group - a network of socialist Christians. He was also one of the church's leading experts on drug culture and the social problems it create. After 40 years as a priest and community theologian in Central and East London he retired in 2004 and now livesin Manchester

Mr. Mark Adams
Age: 50
Interviewed: 24 March 2006
Interviewer: Jamil Iqbal
Mr. Adams was an anti-racist activist in the late 1970s and also involved in working class struggles. He worked for SHAPRS and is currently a Regeneration Manager in South Kilburn.

Ms. Mithu Ghosh
Interviewed: 09 May 2006
Interviewer: Jamil Iqbal
Ms. Ghosh was one of the founding members of Jagonari - one of the first women's resource centres for the local community in East London. She worked for the Tower Hamlets Law Centre as an immigration lawyer in the late 1970s and currently works as an independent housing consultant for Tower Hamlets Council.

Mr. Mohammed Abdus Salam
Age: 49
Interviewed: 22 June 2006
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal
Mr. Salam is the founding member of Progressive Youth Organisation (PYO), which was based at the Robert Montefiore Centre. In the late 1907s PYO took the lead in street confrontations with racist NF and was associated with many distinctive social youth activities.

Mr. Nooruddin Ahmed
Interviewed: 10 April 2006
Interviewer: Jamil Iqbal, Charlie Sen and Riza Momin
Mr. Ahmed in the 1970s was a young political activist and the founding member of Bangladesh Youth League. He also worked for Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Justice (THARJ) and was one of the field officers responsible for monitoring the racial incidents in and around Brick Lane. Currently he is working for a community research organisation in East London.

Mr. Rajonuddin Jalal
Interviewed: 11 March 2006
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal and Charlie Sen
Mr. Jalal was involved in the formation of the Bangladesh Youth Movement (BYM), which was a crucial youth organisation struggling against the then National Front in 1978. He was involved in setting up many cultural projects in Tower Hamlets, including the Kabi Nazrul Centre. The BYM was one of the leading organisations which coordinated the biggest protest march from Whitechapel to the House of Commons. Currently, he works as a Manager for Havering Council.

Ms. Shila Thakor
Interviewed: 09 May 2006
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal
Ms. Thakor was one of the leading members of Jagonari - one of the first women's centres in East London to struggle against discriminations and to fight for women's rights. Currently, she is an Early Years Advisory Teacher at Tower Hamlets Council.

Mr. Sunahwar Ali
Age: 45
Interviewed: 23 May 2006
Interviewer: Jamil Iqbal
Mr. Ali was a radical political activist in the late 1970s and the founding member of British Youth Front. He was closely linked in establishing the Kabi Nazrul Centre and was also involved in renaming the Montefiore School as Osmani School. He was associated with the Asian Unemployment Outreach Project (AUOP) in the East End.

Mr. Suroth Ahmed (Faruk)
Age: 49
Interviewed: 30 April 2006
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal, Ansar Ahmed Ullah and Charlie Sen
Mr. Ahmed was one of the founding members of Bangladesh Youth Approach (BYA). He was the fourth resident of Toc H and helped many Bengali families in East End from racial attack.

Mrs. Syeda Rowshanara Choudhury Shelly
Age: 51
Interviewed: 10 June 2006, Manchester
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal and Ansar Ahmed Ullah
Mrs. Begum came to this country in 1981. She recalls the loneliness she felt as part of a few Bengali families in the small town of Stockport and the atrocities committed by the Pakistani army in her village in March 1971.

Mr. Terry Fitzpatrick
Age**:** 60
Interviewed: 01 June 2006
Interviewers: Jamil Iqbal
Mr. Fitzpatrick worked as a builder in the early '70s. He is regarded as the champion of the Bengali community in fighting anti-racism in East London and started the squatting movement around Brick Lane to accommodate people in empty flats. He is still very active in the anti-fascist movement and probably one of the few activists from the 1970s who stayed most constant to that cause. He speaks fluent Sylheti (Bengali) and is a regular contributor to 'Searchlight', a monthly magazine challenging racism and fasism in Britain and around the world.

2nd Strand interviews

11. History of Brick Lane

Kenneth Leech

In the mid-14th century there was a plan to build a brick church. It was the second Christian church in East London. They carried the bricks from an old Roman cemetery called the Old Lulworth's cemetery. They carried the brick from Lulworth field which is [now] Spitalfields. They carried it to Whitechapel Road and The Highway. They carried the bricks [along what later] became known as Brick Lane. Because the church was made of White bricks, people called it the White Chapel and then gave its name to the area and eventually to the main road.

[The chapel] was not … called Whitechapel at all - it was called St. Mary Matfellon, built in 1348. … The church was burned down in [the] 18th century and rebuilt and burned down again in the 19th century and rebuilt again, and then totally destroyed in the Second World War. It's on the side where the Altab Ali Park now is and a little bit of it still remains - the gates and the couple of burial stones - otherwise nothing remains of the church. It was bombed in the 1940s and by 1958, when I came to the area, it was actually pulled down.

Akikur Rahman

Brick Lane? Me and other colleagues … like Jalal, Shiraj and all, we dream about Brick Lane. … I think *Ziaur Rahman* promised us to put a Brick Lane in Dhaka as well, which has never happened. Also we had a song … - it was a copy of the national anthem of Bangladesh: "*Amar sonar Bangla, ami tomai bhalo bashi*". We used to sing: "*Amar sonar Brick Lane, ami tomai bhalo bashi*". In Brick Lane we had … demonstrations every day. We used to sing this song and our view was [that] Brick Lane should be Banglatown. ... And Brick Lane is still our pride, especially Banglatown is our pride - that [is] something no other community has done. … As long [as] Brick Lane is there, Bengalis will be there. We [have] got about 30 or 40 restaurants there and we are proud of [this].

Rajonuddin Jalal

Brick Lane was quite grotty. I mean back in 1978 it was not as colourful as it is now. The curry houses by spending their own money have made the area colourful. The shop fronts are colourful and, of course, a lot of public money has been invested in this area as well. Regeneration money from the government has [made a] … lot of improvements in the area. But back in 1978 it was not such a nice place. So it has improved significantly. If anything, there has been a lot of gentrification, so the houses that used to sell for about £16,000 or £17,000 per unit back in 1978 … will sell for more than £1,000,000 now. So that means a lot of rich people have moved into the area. They have taken over Victorian places and given them new meanings. The rich people that have moved into the area are not Bengali people. If anything, a lot of Bengali people have left the area because of the gentrification that has taken place.

I am not against new people coming to the area but Bengali people and also many working class White people have moved out of the area, just because they can't afford to stay here any more. They have been priced out of the area. That is the significant contrast between 1976-78 and now.

Nooruddin Ahmed

When I came in '69 I didn't know what was the number of Bangladeshis here but I would [say that] it was a very small community. … It was a predominantly Jewish community, though they started moving by '69 in larger numbers. But lots of factories, tailoring factories, shops were owned by the Jewish people. Some were owned by Pakistanis and us, some by Turkish [people] … as well. So there were not many Bangladeshi-owned factories or shops but Bangladeshis were working in factories and it was mainly the men. Until … the liberation [war] you could count [the] number of families on your hands. ... In terms of facilities people would have been sharing rooms or a flat, sharing food and sharing houses. Lots of houses wouldn't have television. People will go [to work] … from Monday to Friday and sometimes on Saturday people will work overtime. Then there was no bath inside the house. People will go to the public bath [to wash]. And for men it [was] a routine thing to go to watch television on Saturday, watching wrestling. It was one of the most popular programmes for elderly or middle aged man. That was … their routine entertainment. …

Nowadays Brick Lane is completely different. Now you have a Brick Lane where thousands of people are coming and the population has grown. … Now catering [provides] food for a wide range of people from outside, but at that time Brick Lane was catering … for Bangladeshis in terms of shops and other facilities. I think there was lots of solidarity as well. … Now the community has grown, … [the number of] families has grown and [people] have their own responsibilities. … And there were two major factors. One was up in [the] north of England factories were closing so people started to come here … for employment. On the other hand, in 1971 there was the liberation war in Bangladesh, so people were fleeing Bangladesh and they didn't find employment in the North so they started coming here. So it became overcrowded. … Because people had the solidarity, people put up with extra people in their houses and somehow managed.

Aloke Biswas
Brick Lane has got [a] long history of immigrant workers coming and working. Back in the 1930s there was a substantial number of Chinese people [there] … involved in the rag trade - the clothing industry. This was gradually taken over by the Jewish community, all through the '40s and '50s. In the mid '60s … it was the Bengali Sylheti community who responded to the call given by the government [to] come as there [was] work to be done. I am talking about late '50s. Politically, during that time … the [Conservative] Party … said we never had it so good. The country was flourishing after the Second World War, the economy picked up, people from abroad came. The Afro-Caribbean community came from Jamaica, Barbados - a whole range of people from the Caribbean islands were pouring in, because there were jobs to be done. … The difference between the Caribbean and the Asian community was that the Caribbean community said: "We are going to the motherland." They saw Britain as coming home, whereas we Asians never saw Britain as the motherland.

The Jewish community [was] handing over the clothing industry to the Asian community back in the mid '60s. That phenomenon continued right until the end of the 1970s and then we began to see the Turkish community getting into this trade towards the end of the '70s and '80s. Now you will see [that] the majority of the workshops are run by the Turks and there are few Asians and a few Jews in the rag trade. … There was not [the] significant number of restaurants that we see today. There were two known restaurants - The Clifton owned by a non-Bengali [and] The Nazrul owned by a Bengali, [who] we used to call *mama* and that's where we use to have our food.

Brick Lane was really dilapidated but it was always a lively place. You go to Brick Lane and you see people talking to each other. Even today coming to Brick Lane means going back home for many people. You will see people talking and meeting each other, buying … food and all these things. A very lively community and that is something very precious to us. And [it was] almost spiritual that anybody from outside was most welcome [to] have the food.

But during that time Brick Lane, Chicksand House and all the streets were in a dilapidated condition. One thing began to happen - the economic resurgence … and Europe coming together. And suddenly the government realised that Brick Lane is too close to the City [of London] and the City was beginning to respond in the 1970s to the international image of money making, capitalism and so on. The Bank of England was broadened and all the service industry [began] to come hand in hand [with] the computer. … While they put all the money and energy into the development of the Isle of Dogs, Canary Wharf etc, they could not leave this [locality] behind. And so they began to give grants to do Brick Lane up and some of the buildings were really old.

Brick Lane began to transform and people responded very positively. … Brick Lane played it hard as much as the other cities like Birmingham, Leicester or Southall in terms of bringing out food. But it is not the food. It is our existence and our language and our civilisation - how to live peacefully - which matters more to me.

John Eversley
When I moved to Tower Hamlets in 1977, I lived just west of Brick Lane in Old Castle Street. I had a proper kitchen but it was cheaper to [eat] in Brick Lane. So I was [often] in … Brick Lane … The established restaurants were the Nazrul and the Clifton, and, in fact, my nearest restaurant was right at the bottom of Brick Lane near Osborne Street. It was nothing special, the dishes were very [limited] and, of course, they served *karai balti* at that time but there were no posh napkins to be had. … The sweet shops … were run by young Bangladeshi men - they weren't full of City workers coming to eat.

I can't remember when all that began to change. I moved out of Brick Lane at the very end of 1985 or early 1986 for personal reasons and I did not eat out at curry houses for quite a long time after that. So I don't remember but I guess some time between 1978 and 1986 more restaurants began to open [up]. At first they were beginning to give grants to people to open up places. I never quite understood why they were giving grants but anyway … they were. The first person I can remember, who benefited from that was Shiraj, who was involved with Bangladesh Youth Front, and I think somehow one of those restaurant grants came through that. I can't remember whether Rouf, the accountant, also got involved in some of the restaurant grants but he was significant because he became the chair of Tower Hamlets Training Forum. So he got involved with the clothing industry project but he knew everybody because he was the accountant or book-keeper to everybody. As well as those people there were some of the established restaurants. I can't remember the name of the guy who ran the restaurant in Gunthorpe Street where only established restaurant owners used to meet. They were quite influential. But by the late 1980s there were more and more of these places and they were more and more catering to the White visitor market. They got licences so that you could drink beer in them. They started to [use] table cloths.

Derek Cox

In Brick Lane there was a cafe that used to be Hungarian one. There were no restaurants [then]. Truman's Brewery … employed lots of people. We used to work with [the] Great Eastern Building's tenants, [who] used to take down sacks of dead rats to the Town Hall. … There was a Chinese [man], Shui Wong, [who] used to catch the rats and put them in bags and take them down to the Town Hall and say: "What you are going to do about it?" There were still a lot of … fifth or sixth generation Irish families and most of the estates [were] mainly Irish families. ... Also Cypriots, both Greek and Turkish, [but] very few from the Caribbean and very few from Asia …but a lot [also] from Malta and a declining Jewish population [were there]. In the '80s … there was a Jewish club … and the synagogues were [still] open. … When I came in '63, I lived in Old Nichol Street. I was scared to walk out. It took two years for me to [become] confident.

Mohammed Abdus Salam

Brick Lane has now become world famous. It has attracted the whole European community. It has become one of the icons of our country. .. [Nobody believed] 25-30 years [ago that] Brick Lane would become … one of the [most tourist attractive] places in the country. … Today's businessmen and today's community workers, politicians in Brick Lane are enjoying … what we established in the '70s.

Sunahwar Ali

Once we took over the Council in 1994 a range of ideas and initiatives were locked in the shelves for years. We thought it was the time to make them true, because we had the power and we had the opportunity. … In 1997, Rajonuddin Jalal was the chair of the regeneration [committee] and I was the vice-chair. There was lot of regeneration going on and there were lot of changes taking place. This was the opportunity for us to name the area of Brick Lane (as) Banglatown. There was lots of opposition [from] the White councillors but we managed to pursuade them. There was [also] major opposition came from our colleagues who were Bengali councillors. … Jealousy was the main cause, because Jalal's and my name were coming into the scene and they were being left out.

When we were trying to set a date and pursuing a [Bangladeshi] Minister to come and open [Banglatown], it took three months. After that we found the opportunity and Abdus Samad Azad was the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh and one of our friends talked to him and he was willing to come in September. And once we publicly announced it … was difficult for those who were trying to stop us and then we continued. … Chinatown was established by the business community [but] Banglatown was never established by the businessmen - it was the politicians and community activists. We didn't have any money from any business community. There was Truman's Brewery and [another] site … and we did a community plan for the two sites. We formed a community development group … [and] managed to convince Prince Charles to back … [the] plan. … We negotiated with the developer and … they agreed [to give] 12 acres of land. ... The total size of the property was 27 acres. We thought that was the time to name … these 12 acres of land Banglatown. But subsequently what was happened? Due to fall of the financial market … nobody came with the money. So the whole idea was lost. Then when we came to power in 1994, we thought of this again … [and used] our political influence [to name the area] Banglatown.

12. Youth Movements

Brick Lane demo 1978.

© Paul Trevor

Nooruddin Ahmed

I started with [being involved in] the … youth movements in 1978. That was very much a spontaneous response of the Bangladeshi community with the support of the host community and a number of other communities who felt threatened by racism at that time. So that was a movement rather then anything organised and subsequently, the interest of the people has grown in various things including politics ... But in order to achieve anything in the long term, we will have to … take a long-term strategy and [this] strategy has to be a political one. So therefore people started to join political parties. …

When … Altab Ali was killed, the Bangladeshi community was not organised … like today. … Obviously, the largest and oldest organisation that we had at that time was the Bangladesh Welfare Association. … It was the only organisation that was going for so many years and they had their own property. [It was] …something to be proud of but it wasn't exactly the right organisation to respond to the changing demands of the Bangladeshi community. So people started to look into the problems that the community was facing … and how to address them. ... People started forming various organisations and there were four main youth organisations. One was the Bangladesh Youth League, which I was a part of, [and the others were] the Bangladesh Youth Movement, the Bangladesh Youth Front and the Bangladesh Youth Association.

Within them I think there were two schools of thought. One was that we are just some sort of community-type welfare organisation and [the] other [that] we were a socio-political organisation. I came from the school of thought which believed that we are a socio-political organisation - we are to challenge things politically and we are to challenge because everything has a root in social justice and qualities. And the Youth League was from that school. Interestingly, the large number of people, who set up the Youth League, were people who were quite experienced with politics. They were involved in politics in Bangladesh and came to this country. Whereas people with the other organisations were inexperienced about politics, because they were local people, [who have] never been involved with politics. …

[At the] end of the day everyone thought [that] we need to look into the root causes of our problems. … In order address [them] we need mechanisms, so people started forming organisations. We all had differences of opinion but one thing we had in common [was] that the community is facing problems [which have] to be addressed. We all tried to do it in our own way [but] later on we thought: "Ok, we have got so many youth organisations, not only in Tower Hamlets but in other parts of London, as well as in other parts of the country. Therefore we need to unite them and provide … a united platform." So together we formed an organisation called the Federation of Bangladesh Youth Organisations (FBYO). It was an umbrella organisation. I was a chair of that organisation, as well ... [as] later on an organisation called BENTH, (Bangladesh Educational Needs in Tower Hamlets), [which] was more specifically to address the educational needs of Tower Hamlets. … THARJ (Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Justice) was another umbrella organisation but it was dealing with race relations and racial harmony locally.

Dan Jones

I was engaged in helping develop youth organisations and facilities for young people … working for the Council in the early '70s. I worked with all sorts of different groups in the Cable Street area really. In the … mid-'70s we began to help the development of a number of different Bengali-dominated groups of young people - cultural activity, theatre, drama activity, and social youth facilities and things like that. So I was a kind of godfather, as a person with access to buildings and things like that, to what became the Bangladesh Youth Movement. … I was very interested in music and cultural activity, artistic things … and all sorts of things were emerging from the Bangladeshi community in those days. Things just starting - concerts - and my daughter sings, so she joined a Bengali group with her friend Shapla and used to sing their Bengali song like little parrots. For theatre stuff I worked with Shah Lutfur Rahman, who was a drama teacher and a lawyer – [a] very remarkable and very interesting character. I guess it was '74-'75. He was a very close friend and we were doing wonderful … [things together], and it was supposed to be a drama club but we did more than that. … Jalal was involved with the theatre. Rajonuddin Jalal was … one of Peter East's residents as [were] Syed Nurul Islam and others.

That was (I guess) all before '78. … '76 was very important. In fact, it was the turning point really. People tend to think the entire thing happened in a big way in '78, but really '76 was a time of very real threat. There [was a] huge rash of racist attacks going on, racist killings in Tower Hamlets and Newham … and an atmosphere of some very real fear. I remember we had a huge meeting in '76. Jalal spoke out in what was then [the] *Naz Cinema* and the Bishop came and spoke wonderfully. Two thousand people with no way out. People like *Farrukh Dhondy*, *Mala Dhondy* and *Darcus Howe* were around a lot and that was a very important time. The beginning of people's talking about their rights of self-defence.

Kenneth Leech

I was involved with the youth movement … generally in the East End [for a long time] but I think my first contact with the Bengali youth movement would have been at the end of the '70s. I remember getting grants from the British Church's Race Relations Funds for the Bangladesh Youth Front and the Bangladesh Youth Movement, and then later for the Progressive Youth Organisation. The Bangladesh Youth Front was based north of Whitechapel, based mainly around Brick Lane, Spitalfields, and the Bangladesh Youth Movement was based south of Commercial Road off Cannon Street Road. And so they covered different geographical areas. The Progressive Youth Movement came later and also the Bangladesh Youth League and one Bangladesh Youth Approach - they were further east. The one I had most contact was the Youth Front, which was led by Shiraj Huq and Rafiq Ullah and the Youth Movement, which was led by Jalal Uddin and the group to the south of the area. And they reflected the different constituencies with Whitechapel Road [which] very much divides the two Bengali communities.

I think in one sense I tried to keep a fairly low profile on this, because I think originally I had no credibility in the Bengali community. They didn't know who I was, except for a small group, who been around for a long time - people like Tassaduq Ahmed, who might have known me since 1964. I used to eat in his restaurant, called 'The Ganges', where it is alleged that the war of independence was planned. But most of the young Bengalis had no idea who I was. So I supposed I approached it from two directions. One was I did know something about funding and for a while I was a field officer for the British Council of Churches, [which was] responsible for the grants for community relations. [This] meant I had access to the funding, which most of the Bengali groups didn't.

Some of the people who were involved in the youth movement [are now] quite rich businessmen. They have restaurants and saree shops. [At that time] they were not rich and were working on a shoe string. They didn't know where to go for the funding. So I became quite helpful at the funding level, which made me a lot of close friends. I am still in touch with a lot of the people who formed the early Bengali youth groups.

Rajonuddin Jalal

I was involved in the formation of the Bangladesh Youth Movement (BYM), which was a crucial youth organisation organising against the then National Front from back in 1978. I was involved in setting up many cultural projects in Tower Hamlets, for example, the *Kabi Nazrul Centre*. The youth movement played an important role against the fascists when they became organised and active in the Brick Lane area following the murder of Altab Ali and Ishaq Ali back in 1978. The youth movement was one of the leading organisations that organised the first protest march that involved about 2,000 Bengalis coming out in the streets of London, marching from Whitechapel to the House of Commons and back. And the slogan was: "Here to stay, here to fight."

The main brain behind the organisation was the late Shahjahan Lutfur Rahman. He was a teacher at the Whitechapel Centre, the ideal educational establishment. And a group of us, including myself, used to attend the centre as students taking part in the language classes, drama activities and, of course, the recreational activities as well. Shahjahan Lutfur Rahman went beyond the call of duty and used to spend time with the young people talking about social issues and community affairs and gradually he got a group of us interested in the community.

And so we decided in 1976 to form the Bangladesh Youth Movement. There are a lot of people to name and there will be some people who will be upset if I don't mention them. The fact of the matter is that I can [only] remember a few names for the time being. Another important player in this organisation was late Oboy Khan, who died recently. He gave us free premises at Cavell Street, not so far from Whitechapel station, which was our first base. And then later on when we became a stronger group, we obtained premises from the then Greater London Council, at the Berner Youth and Tenants Centre, which is based near Cannon Street Road. This was our proper centre [where] we were able to organise a youth club and other activities as well. One of the … people, who played a key role in getting the centre from the Greater London Council, was Dan Jones, [who] was the Secretary of the Tower Hamlets Trades Council at the time. …
If you go back to 1976, then you would find that the existence of the community was not really acknowledged in the wider arena and so having a youth movement as an organisation itself was an important achievement. Later on in 1978, following the murder of Altab Ali and Ishaq Ali, it became a very important organisation in that it was mobilising the community against racism. … So it was an organisation that mobilised the young people. It mobilised the community at large, it gave a voice to the community, it organised people to support … [those] who were victims of racial attacks on the housing estates and on the streets. Later on it played a role in politicising the community.

So you would find in [the] early '80s young people were taking part in the political process. Many of the people, who used to be involved with the Bangladesh Youth Movement, are now councillors in Tower Hamlets. So historically it was a very important organisation. It happened to be there at the right time, mobilising the community and therefore significant from that point of view.

John Eversley
The main [youth organisations] I was aware of were the Bangladesh Youth League based at Toynbee Hall, the Bangladesh Youth Movement with which Dan Jones was more involved, the Bangladesh Youth Front, which I think was based at the Brady Centre by then (1978). They all had different sponsors, different people both within the Bangladesh community and among the White youth workers who supported them. There was a degree of competition about who is more authentic and who is the more politically aware. … There were certainly those who aligned themselves with progressive political movements and [those] who were backward and who were more self-interested and all of that. They were pretty messy. And this was all before the Federation of Bangladesh Youth Organisations (FBYO) began to draw people together in a more concerted way. There were enormous pressures to create … an umbrella body, because the statutory bodies didn't want to choose between one organisation and the other. So if they could fund the umbrella organisation, they thought that would be easier. So there was definitely intervention from such agencies as the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), in particular, to try and form a Federation of Bangladesh Youth Organisations.

Derek Cox
[I worked for] Avenues Unlimited then. We appointed the first Asian full time youth worker in the country, Ashok Basu Dev- that was in 1970. He left after four years. Then in 1976 we appointed Caroline Adams to replace Ashok. A little bit later we appointed John Newbigin. We used to call Caroline and John our Asian department. … We were one of the best youth organisations in the area. …

In the early '80s community resource all the big meetings took place … in the Montefiore Centre. It was quite an exciting place. Some of the … new youth organisations like the Progressive Youth Organisation started off there. The Avenue's workers … job was to stand back and encourage people to run things themselves. … Peter East used to have a [*Toc H*] hostel … [near] Tower Hill. … There were a number of key people, like Jamal and Jalal and Syed Nurul, [in] residence there. Peter first and then John took over taking groups of young men to residential holidays with Toc H.

I remember taking Abbas Uddin, who was one of the first Bengali guys in the mixed group. We took them to the Lake District in the '70s. At that time most of the groups we were taking were multiracial minority Asian kids and so on. We had a few sick boys … as well. In the '80s things were changing and [Bengali] families were coming over and we were working less with the White and Black families in the area. We changed to working more with the Bangladeshis. …
We do quite a lot now with art projects and that kind of stuff now. Remember the gap between me and the young people is getting wider and wider. We had only two male workers, so for a long time it was me and lot of woman workers, mainly Bangladeshi and Somali. … [This is what] we did for Bangladeshi boys and it finished unfortunately in 2002. But [during] those 14 years they were coming and every activity you could think of – a bit like a military camp. The kids loved it and there were campfires every night and there were competitions.

John Newbigin

In 1976, what is now the Bethnal Green City Technology College was then called Daneford School. There were about 60 or 70 Bengali boys at the school. I discovered that the way the school was dealing with racism … was to lock the Bengali boys in a classroom at break time to stop them being beaten up. So you can imagine that what was happening was that around the doors and windows of the classrooms … the White kids [were] beating on the windows, spitting at the windows saying: "We will get you when you get out". There were kids who [had] just arrived from Bangladesh, just weeks before. They had no idea what was going on. They were absolutely terrified.
There was a very remarkable Pakistani teacher there called Mushtaq Ahmed, who was really determined to try and get these kids in a state of mind that they could fight back. So one of the things that I did quite early on was that I started some football teams. And we also started a kung-fu club in St. Hilda's [Community Centre] to begin [teaching] kids self-defence. Because their inclination when they were being attacked by a group of kids or challenged by a group of White boys in the street, was to be polite or to run away and they didn't have the confidence of the organisation to fight back. So a lot of what we were doing at a very, very simple level was beginning to build social organisations. As I said, football clubs, drama classes, kung-fu clubs, which then acquired a political dimension. And particularly in 1978, the Bangladesh Youth Movement, the Bangladesh Youth Association, the Progressive Youth Organisation and a whole series of youth organisations grew up. … [They were] entirely autonomous in the sense that they were managed, driven and run by the young people themselves. They had a social dimension but they very rapidly acquired a political dimension, and they were very sophisticated political organisations. They were real community organisations and they were involved in helping to defend people when they were under attack.

They were [also] involved in lobbying the Council because at that time Tower Hamlets Council really had almost no understanding of the incoming Bengali culture. And the way they thought you communicate to some Bangladeshi was that you shout at them in English. It was unbelievable how primitive the approach, particularly the housing department, was because they were under a great deal of strain.

... The young people, who started the organisations, … wanted to produce documents, so they needed facilities, they needed offices to be able to produce that. They wanted premises, they wanted assistance in going and lobbying the Council or the churches or community organisations in order to get premises. They wanted help with planning their programmes. And … in the early days … the way they manifested their existence was to have functions of one kind or another. So they would have a meeting, they would have speakers, they would have a dinner afterwards, they would organise some activity and a lot of it had a social dimension, [such as] snooker, billiard, football, as well as political activity and community activity. So, as a youth and community worker, myself and Caroline Adams who were working in … Avenues Unlimited and the other community workers in the area and some people like Kenneth Leech were involved in helping to provide facilities and helping young people to get organised, to get in touch with councillors to lobby for resources and to build up a profile of their organisations.

Mohammed Abdus Salam

I came from Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, in 1969 with my parents. … It was necessary [to form] … the Progressive Youth Organisation (PYO) because I [and others] … faced racist problems in the school background and the street. … I realised that life here in this country will be difficult. Subsequently, I met some other friends from Brick Lane of a similar age. … [and] we were thinking that we are here to stay in this country and we have to fight back. How can [we] fight back? How can we stand on our own feet? So we all then became students of an evening class. We also felt [that] in order to fight socially, politically, we have to have a certain level of education. … One of our veteran teachers who inspired us [was] … Abdul Aziz.

… Then gradually we became involved with youth activities. Being young … we also [took up the] responsibility [for providing] some voluntary activity for other young people in the area. At the same time we were also aware how our parents are coping with this hostile environment. We tried to advise [them] about employment … and provide support on … housing and so on. Although our English was also poor, we felt that we will be able to support and to help our older generation. Then around the mid-'70s … we also felt that we have to be physically tough and intellectually tough. We also believed [that] we have to prepare our young people to stand on their own feet and to fight back. We then started physical training, kung fu. … And we then used to confront [White racists] as a group physically, because they were hitting our elders, smashing shops and all kind of things, and it was affecting local business.

Gradually our group [became] bigger and bigger. One of our leaders, Jafor Khan, used to encourage and support us. He used to live in [Old] Castle Street and in his house we formed the Progressive Youth Organisation. …. We were then given a place at the Montefiore Centre, [which was then] very much a White-dominated centre. I think it was around the time of killing of Altab Ali. … We then become affiliated with other national bodies, local authorities and so on. We had half a dozen of staff. … We were campaigning against racism, against institutional racism and against police harassment and so on.

We also felt, in the beginning of the '80s, education is one of the principal thing for any development. So we felt that our parents, our elders were not able to cope with the educational institutions. … We were not equipped enough to help our own kids at home. They had insufficient accommodation for homework. … So this is one of the reasons [that] our kids were failing very much from the mid-'70s to mid-'80s and up to '90. We then from the Progressive Youth Organisation established a students' homework support class. … It was based in the PYO youth club in the Montefiore Centre, with six students on the first day. Now about 700 students are registered with it. Hundreds of students went to Cambridge, Oxford and other local universities.

So I think we have achieved [a lot] … [but] it will take another half a century. This is what I feel proud of … we [have been] involved in this … from the beginning. A female student came down to our school a few years back for a celebration party and she said that if she was living in Tower Hamlets she would [be] sending her kids to the school. … Maybe it will take another quarter century to become a place like other boroughs.

Sunahwar Ali
Actually, [the youth movement] started in 1976 when all the racist attacks took place in Brick Lane. … That time I used to live in Hackney and I used to attend [the] Robert Montefiore School - the school is no longer there. We set up a football team called the Bengal Tigers. …

We were the young people [and] we realised that we needed to form some kind of organisation. The Bangladesh Welfare Association was there but they weren't taking any active part in the anti-racist activity. They were solely engaged in … what they used to do and what they believed. I don't blame them for that, because they had their limited knowledge or experience.

We decided to form a youth organisation. That time some of our friends came together and we formed the Bangladesh Youth Front [at] the beginning of 1978. In the same period on the other side of Commercial Road the Bangladesh Youth Movement was formed. There was [also] the Bangladesh Youth Association and the Bangladesh Youth League. … Initially we were not known to each other and then we came to know one another and we decided to work together closely, though using different names and different organisations. …

[After the Altab Ali murder] we discovered [that] we needed to get engaged in some of the tenants associations. [However], getting involved in tenants associations wasn't getting us anywhere so we decided to get involved in mainstream local politics. There was one of our prominent leaders at that time, Fakhruddin Ahmed, who stood by us always. … All the older generation was behind the Bangladesh Welfare Association and they were blaming us, saying: "Those are the young people who will be responsible if the British government decides to kick us out of the country." Fakhruddin was the only elderly person who was [supporting us] and he thought we were doing the right thing. At that time John Newbigin used to work for Avenues Unlimited [with] Derek Cox, Caroline Adams and so on. We got support from [them].

13. Altab Ali Murder

Jamal Hasan
The Altab Ali demonstration was a big gathering. Everyone, not only the National Front, but also the establishment started to take us seriously. As soon as Altab Ali was killed, we decided to stage a national demonstration.

At that time, I was involved with almost all the Bangladeshi youth and community organisations in East London. I was particularly actively involved with the Bangladesh Welfare Association (BWA). After Altab Ali's death, there was originally going to be three demonstrations- two by the two opposing groups within the BWA and one by a Muslim group. We had several meetings involving the youths and the elder people at BWA, in the local mosque in Fournier Street and in Toynbee Hall.

The youths played a very effective role in forcing the community to have one big national demonstration instead of three isolated small local demonstrations. I was involved in both the youth groups and the elderly groups and was considered to be impartial and able to relate to all the groups. As a result, I was selected to be the secretary of the coalition organisation to stage the national demonstration. At that time I was a student at Goldsmith College and my tutor gave me 10 days off from attending classes to make this demonstration a success. Because of the generous support from all quarters, it was possible to organise a very successful demonstration from Brick Lane to Hyde Park and ending at Downing Street. Over 7000 different peoples of all ages and organisations from everywhere took part.
After finishing my studies, I joined Tower Hamlets Law Centre as a caseworker. This organisation also played a very effective role in combating racism in East London. The Law Centre dealt with most areas of law, although we did not deal with crime. However, because of the particular situation in East London at that time, an exception was made and we represented the anti-racist people who had been charged with carrying offensive weapons, resisting arrest, causing bodily harm etc. The Law Centre had a 24 hour emergency number to be contacted by the victims of the racist attacks and we used to be at the Magistrates Court almost every day to represent the people arrested by the police in consequence of the trouble at that time.

Following the success of the demonstration, the whole picture in Brick Lane changed. Altab Ali's murder closed the chapter of being attacked and being beaten by racists, with racism in general taking a back-seat. I thought it would be a good idea to celebrate the success of the demonstration in a local park. So, I organised a carnival.

I knew many people in the mainstream political groups. Paul Beasley, who was the Leader of the Council, gave a generous grant for this carnival. I cant' remember the amount—I guess it was £600 or £1200. In those days it was a very big amount. It took us 7 to 10 days to organise and it was a huge event, where we renamed the park, 'Altab Ali Park'. All sorts of musical groups came; Asian groups from Southall and a number of White and African and Caribbean bands participated.

We also eventually had Bhangra dance music in the carnival. Bhangra was just coming up and becoming popular at that time. In the preliminary stages of the carnival, I had booked musical groups from every where except Bangladeshi groups from East London. There were popular Bangladeshi cultural groups outside East London. However, I felt that it was important that local Bangladeshi cultural group performed in the carnival and it would have been a shame if we could not have a cultural group from here.

I found out from Jalal that there were no cultural groups from Brick Lane who had the courage to perform in front of a huge crowd in the carnival. I also found out from Jalal that there were two people, Salique and Rana who had a small cultural group. Salique had formed a cultural group called the 'Dishari Shilp Ghosti'. I went to see him and convinced him that it would be a huge travesty if the local group did not take part in the carnival. Immediately, Salique sent people to call the members of the group and before I could finish my cup of tea, 4-5 young people came to Salique's house where Salique said to them that they had to perform in the carnival. They had to start rehearsing straightaway! I was and still am grateful to Salique for this. His group was cheered by the audience not only because they were local, but because of their stunning performance.

I must mention that there were a number of key people whose contribution to bringing change in East London was enormous. After all these years, it is not possible to remember all the names, but I will never forget the people without whose support I would not be able to organise the demonstration or the carnival successfully. From the youth groups, Jalal, founder member of BYM, Shiraj, the founder member of the Youth Front and Akik, the founder of the Bangladesh Youth Association. All three played a very important role in the anti-racist movement during the late 70s in East London. From the older generation, I must mention, Mr Ataur Rahman, the then general secretary of the BWA, Mr Fakhruddin Ahmed, Mr Junaid Ahmed, Mr Toybur Rahman and Mr Lutfur Rahman Shajahan. I was fortunate enough to have their support all the way.

Nooruddin Ahmed
If you look at the … first demonstration in '78 after Altab Ali's murder, it was the elderly who took the initiative and then the young people joined in. Then obviously the young people were able to march ahead of the older people. They never left each other behind. It worked [as] a kind of solidarity. … So you can say it is a Bangladeshi ingredient or a Bengali ingredient. People experienced the organisation of demonstration, lobbying MPs House of Parliament, House of Commons, giving petitions, everything worked. … [The] 1971 movement affected [what happened] in 1978 and subsequently as well. So those were transferable skills and young people … learned from [the elders]. … If the young people say today: "No, we didn't learn anything from the older generation", [they are] wrong.

Dan Jones
[Altab Ali] lived down the road from us. He lived in Cannon Street Road just round the corner from our house. Salique and friends of ours knew him and, as it happens, it is just a very small world. I knew one of the two boys who were involved in killing him - just very weird. I just happened to know [that] they were local boys. The killing happened on a very historic spot - the old graveyard called St Mary's Park on Whitechapel. It was not just any night. It happened on local election night in May 1978, when the National Front politically … hardly existed but they were agitating and organising. They stood a National Front candidates in every single ward, so there were 50 candidates standing for the NF. The tension was very real that night when the killing happened and [this] young machinist on his way home. There was rightly a huge response from the community and ... the demonstrations [began] and all sorts of things followed on, with different other groups … getting involved in giving their support. Trade unions and anti-racist organisations and Left political groups and all sorts … powered in, particularly the massive Bangladeshi response.

It was very moving and very weird [walking behind the coffin]. You remember the silly things, like the SWP (Socialist Workers Party) gave lollypop sticks with very good slogans - "Black and White Unite". So there were maybe seven thousand people there and they gave us all the lollypops with Anti-Nazi League symbols on little sticks. And then the heavens opened up. It was a torrential downpour, an absolutely fantastic torrent of rain fell down. Everybody was soaked and all the placards on the sticks dissolved and it was a long wait before we started our march to Downing Street behind the coffin.

Seven thousand angry people! And all the sticks standing there with no placards! I remember saying: "OK, comrades, can you please give us your sticks, the lathi?!" and people gave their sticks. We should not think of laughing at funny things - our job was serious. [The] police helped us in our march, and we went from Tower Hamlets to Downing Street. We handed over a memorandum and the [number of] participants was huge at very short notice.

Akikur Rahman
I personally knew Altab Ali. He was working in Hanbury Street at that time. One of my relative[s] got a factory there and he used to work there. He was maybe one or two years older than me. But we really knew each other. We didn't have much to do, so we did go to cinema or things like this. Nowaday[s] we got video, but in those days it was different. … I think it was Friday and he was taking his wages home and he was attacked and he collapsed and was killed [at] the bus stop. He was stabbed and he was running to the bus stop, trying [to] get away but he couldn't make it and he died. So … that was the time.

Obviously, there were few issues going in Tower Hamlets as well. People [were being] attacked all the time. Lots of abuse was going on. … [So] Jalal, … my friend Rafiq and lots of us got together and we decided … to do something about it. Because already Altab Ali was killed, then Ishaq Ali was killed [at a] takeaway. Ishaq Ali had got a restaurant [at] that time in Hackney or somewhere near [there at] that time. … Then Michael Ferreiro, the young boy, was waiting for bus [and] got killed. He was Black. …

Then we mobilised ourselves and thank God we had a lot of friends [at] that time, even from the other communities. They all tried to help us, especially the people from West Bengal … I should name two guys for their contribution [at] that time during the movement was tremendously good - Aloke Biswas and Bhajan Chatterjee. And … there was another [person], a Sri Lankan [called] *Patrick Kodikara*. Without all these three it was not possible. They were expert, they knew how to mobilise. …

One day I remember when I was invited by Patrick Kodikara I was working in Hackney - I think he was a councillor at that time. And he invited us to go there and see how the Council works … I went up there with some friends. So obviously they were encouraging us with meetings and we had a tea party and others. By the time we left from there it was twelve o'clock at night. They dropped us near the top of Brick Lane. About 100 White boys attacked us straightaway and we [had] to fight … to save ourselves. On that day, the police came and just arrested me straightaway. In [those] days the police was one of the problems we had. Nowadays they are quite experienced but they were not experienced during that time. So … a White guy accused me that I hit him and broke his arm … so they arrested me and took me to the police station. And I was there [but] the next day I was bailed out. And I had to go to the court, and for six months they banned me from Brick Lane. I could not go to Brick Lane … on Saturday or Sunday. …

The case went up to the court and the Magistrate was good, he was really good. He just looked at the police officer and looked at everybody [and] said: "Well, Mr. Rahman, what were you doing there?" I said: "Look Sir, I was in Hackney and I asked for a lift and [to] drop me near there. Suddenly there was a group of people, [who] came and attacked us. So obviously we had to save ourselves [and] we fight back. … But if I am being accused that I have broken somebody's leg, or broken somebody's arm, I think I don't know what I did - I had to save my life." The Magistrate got angry with the police and everything. He discharged me and dismissed the case and said to me: "Mr Rahman, you are free man to go home." Since then I was really encouraged that justice in this country is not bad.

Kenneth Leech
I think I need to go back some years and the murder of Altab Ali was in 1978 in May. There have been earlier racial killings and racial violence. I think 1969 was a crucial year, because two phrases entered the English vocabulary in that period, and these were phrases that should not be used and not in the dictionaries. One was the term 'skinhead' which was not known before 1969. We never talked about 'skinheads' but I remember chairing a meeting with the youth worker from North Kensington called Jack Devon in 1970 or '71, and I invited him to speak about his work with White teenagers in the Portobello Road area. When he came to speak, he said: "If I have known the word 'skinhead' when you invited me I would have put it in the title." … But it was invented in between my inviting him to come and the actual meeting. He said: "It's fascinating to have been working with a group of young people for five or six years, and suddenly to be told by the media who they are!"

So the word 'skinhead' was invented to describe what was previously seen as just ordinary White teenagers who were not hippies, were not junkies, were not '*beatniks*', were not anything special, just ordinary working class kids, and they suddenly got a name. And it was connected with the second term which was the term 'Paki bashing'. Now I first heard the term 'Paki' bashing on the Collingwood Estate in Cambridge Heath Road in Bethnal Green. I think probably it was first used to describe young people, who were involved with attacks on Asians [and] were indiscriminately lumped together as 'Pakis'. And they still are in many places, irrespective of where they actually come from. 'Paki' can refer to people from [the] Middle East, can refer to people from Bangladesh. [It is] just a general abusive term.

There was quite a marked increase in racial violence associated with that period in 1969-1970 and there were some racial murders. The importance of the killing of Altab Ali was that, first of all, it happened on an election night. It happened when he was going to vote. But also it came at the time of climax of these long periods of racial attacks and I suppose you could say it was the last straw. It wasn't the fact that there haven't been any other killings and it will be wrong to say that it was worst of them all. But it was the one that mobilised the community or one section of the community to protest and about seven thousand, mostly Bengali, carried the coffin to Downing Street as a protest. So I think it was a kind of symbolic importance quite apart from the fact of the killing itself. And it eventually led to the renaming of the park where the Whitechapel had originally stood. And it was renamed Altab Ali Park in memory of this relatively unknown clothing worker. I mean many people in the East End, probably most of the Bengali people, didn't know who he was. And now the park is named after him and it has become very much a kind of place of pilgrimage for the people to remember the victims of racial violence.

Caroline Adams … was the first youth worker to work exclusively with the Bangladeshi youth and she said [that] the murder of Altab Ali was part of the coming of age of Bangladeshi people who refused any longer to accept the role of passive victim and realised that they have to become involved in the politics of Britain if anything was to change. I think it's not unfair to say that a lot of the older Bengalis, prior to the '70s were far more interested in the politics of Bangladesh than they were in the politics of Britain. If you saw BNP on a wall, it didn't mean British National Party, it meant a political party in Bangladesh. [This was] quite confusing to the White people who didn't know; can't understand why Bengalis are voting for the BNP! But there was a definite shift. I think it began with the election of an independent Bengali councillor, Nurul Huque, who is still around, I think. It was the election of Nurul Huque, which made the White politicians sit up and think: "Goodness, the Bengali community is getting quite sizeable now - we could lose our seats if we are not careful."

There was a period when the Labour Party was so secure and so sure that it will always win in the East End that they never bothered to count these votes! And they certainly never printed their election leaflets in a non-English language, because they just assume they will just be elected. There was a man known as the invisible man, who was one of the councillors for Spitalfield and nobody had seen him for years and nobody knew where he works. You knocked on his door and he is never there. He was eventually discovered in the Harvard Business School in the United States! Dan Jones tells me [this story but] I have never been able to verify this. I don't remember his name [but] it is quite believable. Dan says that at a certain point the Labour Party got in a panic and decided they really have to print their literature in an Asian language, or they would lose their Bengali votes. And Dan says they got the wrong language, and printed it upside down.

Now … half, if not more, of the Tower Hamlets Council is of Bengali origin. The Leader of the Council was Bengali until very recently - Abbas Uddin. The Deputy Leader was a Bengali woman, *Pola Uddin*. There is no way that those people could have been elected on the Bengali vote alone. The population who voted for Pola Uddin was mainly White and mainly traditionally Irish … So I think the involvement in the local politics was an important shift and I think a lot of people were in a sense radicalised.

That's a word [which is] difficult to use now but there was a radicalisation of lots of Bengali youths. I am not sure whether it quite carried through to the next generation - that's an important issue to look at. There are lot of young Bengali now who have never heard of Altab Ali and barely know what the National Front was, and don't know what that period was about. But certainly a political consciousness did increase in a lot of people. I am constantly [meeting] people all over the country who say that they were in a sense radicalised by the events in Brick Lane, although they were living elsewhere and doing other things.

Mithu Ghosh
I came here after the incident [and] remember the huge painting [by] Dan Jones – "Who killed Altab Ali." The huge painting of all those people and the blood trickling down. It was a fantastic work … I used to work in the Tower Hamlets Law Centre and we had some Bengalis on the Management Committee so I heard a lot about it. There were some people … who were involved in politics in Bangladesh and actually quite politically aware. They were the ones who are good at mobilising … and there were lots of rallies and marches and we attended and spoke at most of them. Not in the early part but in the later parts when people were more confident with us.

14. Political Parties in the 1970s and 1980s

Nooruddin Ahmed
In order to change things for your own community … you have to use the political mechanism - you have to have access to resources. Politicians control resources. How do you get decent housing or employment or education? … At that time employment, education and housing, all used to be controlled by the local authority. Therefore, I thought Labour Party was the right party, [with] which I can associate and I can feel ideologically [content]. And that would be the means to achieve not only for my community but as a person of Bangladeshi origin. Here is the country I have adopted. This is my home. I have to contribute to it as well.

When I was an elected member, I did not only work for Bangladeshi people or Pakistan, or Indian people, I worked for my constituency and, of course, it happened to be everyone - Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, English, Somalian, African, Caribbean. … That is what you can do through a mainstream political party. You cannot change everything within Tower Hamlets - sometimes you have to go beyond Tower Hamlets. I remember [the Bangladesh] Youth League [was] one of the [community] organisations, which right from its emergence [was] politically conscious. One of the thing we did [was to hold] meetings in the House of Commons, lobbying the MPs directly, because at that time it would be unthinkable going to the politicians. We said: "Here [are] the people who can make things happen." ...

First, [this involvement] was a spontaneous result from one particular event – [the murder of] Altab Ali. ... So the only way [then] we can articulate our need [was] by being present [at] a meeting or a demonstration, whereas now the same thing can happen behind a desk. We have doctors, we have engineers, we have barristers, any professional field. So the same level of things are happening but at a different level. The same is true with politics as well. Lots of people were joining mainstream political parties.

I remember in the late '80s we … thought it is important for us to be represented in the Council chamber, and therefore [we] wanted local Bengali councillors. No political party will buy the idea, so we thought the only way to do it is to put pressure on them, and the best way to put pressure on them is to put up an independent Bengali candidate. I was involved with it. I remember we had couple of meetings at the Robert Montefiore Centre [and] from there we set up a small committee. I was part of the committee which [said that if] anyone [was] interested to become a member of the council, [they] should express their interest and these are the people who will go through the election process and select people. … We sat for several evenings at the Shahid Bhaban at Fournier Street, which is the headquarters of the Bangladesh Welfare Association, to select people. We put [forward] some candidates and the one that we got elected was Nurul Huque. ... We put [him forward] and the Labour Party was under tremendous pressure.

At the next election they put forward lots of Bangladeshi and lots of them were elected. This was the result of our pressure. And because the Labour Party was forwarding Bangladeshi men, we had no need to put our own independent candidates and … lots of us joined the Labour Party. [People now] had an opportunity to seek nomination of the Labour Party and the party was convinced that the Bangladeshi candidates were equally viable … The party [saw the advantages of selecting] candidates who can represent the local population, [especially if the] local population happens to be significantly Bangladeshi as well.

I think politics has changed now. People are responding to it at different level and different way. I don't totally agree that people have been deskilled, because the circumstances are more is … complex now. … In the '70s and '80s we used to have almost on every weekend huge CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) demonstrations about nuclear [weapons], about peace demonstrations. We don't have those things now but are you going to say that everybody has become [apathetic] No, when the need arrives, look at the demonstration against the invasion of Iraq, millions of people came [out]. Who were those people? Some of those were the old CND people, anti-war people. They thought this is the time for us to go there. … They were perfectly well aware that we might not change, but at least [they wanted] to be there to say that: "I was there and I have registered my name." ...

So I think this is just a shift of priorities. And I think, to an extent, things are happening differently but also to an extent quite effectively in some valuable way. It will be wrong to value '78 as more important than today. Our parents who came here, they had their own way of dealing with things, which was good. People will change to the circumstances and will find the appropriate mean to approach it. That's what is happening and that should happen. We are dealing [with] what we used to deal [with] on the top end of Brick Lane on Sunday mornings [but they are] happening in the evening at the Council Chamber [and] happening at the House of Lords.

Though we don't have a Member of Parliament at least we have a Bangladeshi representative present in the House of Lords. ... Likewise it is happening at the civil service level. It would have been unimaginable in '78, that today in 2006 we will have one of the top civil servants, Anwar Choudhury, representing Her Majesty's Government in Bangladesh as her own representative there. So things have changed. … Politics has become much sophisticated, Bangladeshis are also responding at the same level as well and I think you should look at the list of the Council candidates at this particular local election. There is enough interest among the young local people and most of the candidates are young people. But you will find people always become a bit nostalgic. We think our time was the best time. We all do this. … You people will talk the same thing ten or twenty years later.

Akikur Rahman
Let's put it that way, there was an Anti-Nazi League - they were quite helpful. Each political party [has] their own agenda. … Tower Hamlets was [run] by the Labour Party and [at] the beginning we couldn't get even one councillor. … So I won't say I would get help from any political party. But this one thing I have learned in '78 - if we don't help ourselves nobody will help us. So it's most important that the community help themselves. Political parties have their own agenda, have their own way of work.

Kenneth Leech
Looking at the role of religion in [politics], there has been a certain fear of getting your hands dirty. I remember taking part in a lot of demonstrations against the National Front, for example, and demonstrations about racial violence and some of my fellow Christians - some of them are priests - would say: "Well, we have to pray about it. … We think this will not help [if] you are provoking conflict." And I used to say: "Look, if I point up to the sky and say it's thundering, it's going to rain, are you accusing me of producing the rain? I am drawing your attention to it, not producing it." I think that there is a certain fear of conflict, which runs through a lot of mainstream Christianity.

It was very interesting and I think that has changed quite dramatically, many of the people who refused to have anything to do with the anti-racist struggle at that period, were Black Christians. They took the view: "We will pray about it, we will worship God." But getting involved in secular politics they felt was somehow ungodly, unrighteous and contaminating even, that once you got involved in the politics that you will get your hands dirty, and you would be corrupted. Of course, you might be but I think it does present a very peculiar view of religion.

There was a kind of unwillingness among a lot of the Christian group in the East End, which in some cases was quite small but in other cases it was very large indeed. We need to get involved. I think [the attitude] has changed; it has changed a lot. And I think the British Council of Churches was very important and one of the things that amused me, but I can't understand it, was the way in which a lot of young Bengali activists had a very touching view of bishops. [The bishops] came out very much when the so-called Liberals were in power in Tower Hamlets and gave the Liberal Party such a bad name that Lord Lester recommended to Paddy Ashdown that the branch should be closed down and they should all be expelled from the party, which he didn't do. …

When the Liberals were in [control of the Council], I remember somebody, a Bengali friend - I cannot remember his name now - telephoned me and said: "We are having a protest meeting at the Liberal Party conference in Eastbourne about the discriminatory policies of the Council in Tower Hamlets. Can you find us a bishop to chair it?" And I said to myself: "Why did they want a bishop?" They were all Muslims. I said the [local] bishop … was the Bishop of Chichester and then it dawned on me that bishops in East London were frequently leading anti-racist demonstrations. The Bengalis thought that all bishops were like that. … It was common knowledge that for anti-racist discussions the first person you went to was the Bishop of Stepney. All the Bishops of Stepney were White until John Sentamu, who was an African. They were always seen, even when it was not always true, … as being reliable allies.

I think it was important to realise that racial violence couldn't be isolated from everything else. You couldn't look at it in the abstract or in isolation from the immigration policy and the housing policies and so on. I remember a memorable meeting at Oxford House in Bethnal Green, when a group of us decided to issue a statement against racial harassment and racial injustice. It very quickly polarised, and I am not saying this was typical necessarily - it was one meeting, that's all - but it polarised very quickly. On the one side were the Conservative Party and the Communist Party in complete agreement that what we should do is to issue a general condemnation of racism but we shouldn't get into specifics, [since this] will divide everybody. So it was a Popular Front approach - we issue a general statement that everybody can sign. On the other side there were the Socialist Workers Party, the International Marxist Group, the Socialist Feminists and the Church of England taking the view [that] unless you name the beast and you actually identify what you are talking about, which included thinks like employment policies and housing discrimination, immigration controls, there was no point [in] issuing a statement at all if it was so vague and empty that anybody could sign it. … In the middle was the Labour Party, … who said: "We don't mind what you say but if the Conservatives sign it we won't."

Aloke Biswas

Altab Ali got murdered [and] Ishaq Ali in Hackney. We saw the situation in the name of 'Paki bashing' - the Asian community was under attack and we could not have stayed at home doing nothing. We had to come forward and take it up and have some analysis and try to organise the trade union movement and various progressive community organisations. This is where people like myself came into the scene. Because we came from Hackney, we have the Asian organisation [and] we were the active trade unionists. So we pulled all the trade union forces that we knew. And coupled with these forces, we had some of the Left organisations like International Socialist (IS). I was also a member of Socialist Workers Party (SWP). And then we had the Left wing of the Labour Party - the Militant group, … Socialist Unity, Tariq Ali [who] used to be in the IMG (International Marxist Group) [and the] RCG - Revolutionary Communist Group. They came forward to support us. That was the time all through '70s [when] we had the upsurge of human beings - ordinary people standing up and saying "No" to the racist element, who were attacking the Asian community.

It is very interesting, because you see for the first time the Asians, who were deemed to be very peace-loving, docile and non-engaging people, who have just come here to work and to make money - that was our image - suddenly standing up and saying: "Look, we are a community and we want to contribute to the community, but it will have to be done on equal terms. And there are lots of things that we want to share with you and at the same time we want to learn from you." First and foremost, we said that we want to defend ourselves, because by now … the housing people [were] allocating the [council] flats to the Bangladeshis and to the Asian people, in general, [but] this racist element will not let them get in. … [It became] our job to find them out go and defend them. Sometimes we lost some of the cases and we had to ask for a transfer. In Hackney the families said: "Come what may, we want to stay here and survive, we will defend you." And they won that and they are still living there [in a] lovely place. So [for] the first time the Asian community came out on the street to say: "We are the workers, here to stay, here to fight" - that was one of the slogans.

Unfortunately, we didn't have much positive response from the Conservative Party. Although they condemned racism, … their politics was different because they wanted to win over the Right-wing racist element. It is the vote bank theory. But the Labour Party in the Tower Hamlets supported us, because … the Left-wing progressive socialist-minded [members] of the Labour Party and their newspaper … 'Militant' … came and supported us unquestionably.

Dan Jones
I was with the Labour Party personally but it was not a one party thinking any way. Indeed, during that period or a bit later on quite a lot of the young people emerging from the different youth organisations became interested in the political process and some got involved in the Labour Party and some got involved in the Socialist Workers Party and some got involved in the Liberal Party. It was not a single party. I think you cannot claim that at all.

Sunahwar Ali
We decided to get engaged in local politics in '79, especially persuading the political parties. Under the leadership of Fakhruddin Ahmed we applied to become Labour Party members. [At] that time in Spitalfields the [Labour ward] secretary was Bill Harris. He looked [at] and said they don't have any vacancy. At that time Councillor Annie Elboz and those people … used to run the local Labour Party. Subsequently some people from outside [the area] moved into Leftist parties like [the Socialist Workers Party and also became] members of the Labour Party and so on. They were a minority so they [didn't have any] influence within the party because it was controlled by the Right wing. They saw the opportunity and they helped us to get membership for the Labour Party. So we got involved in the Labour Party politics.

In 1982 there was a local election and we decided [that] there should be a Bengali candidate. [In] Spitalfields they never allowed any Bengali to be a party candidate [and] the only person nominated by the Labour Party was barrister Ashique Ali in St. Katharine's ward. … Then [we] got together to form the People's Alliance and we decided to [enter] independent candidates in the major concentrated Bengali areas. Spitalfields, Saint Mary's, Redcoat and so on. [At] that time Nurul Huque was one of the People's Alliance candidates. He managed to get elected [in Spitalfields] but none of the other people were elected but they got a lot of votes.

... Subsequently, [we put] pressure on the Labour Party and in 1985 we had the majority members who were Bengali in the Spitalfields. Then we managed to select Abbas Uddin [as] the candidate for a by-election [in Spitalfields]. [However], there was a division within us [and one] group decided to put forward Abdul Hannan as an independent candidate. There was a tough election campaign and subsequently Abbas won by just seven votes.

In that year there was a selection and lot of people got selected. … In 1986 there was the local election in May so we had a lot of candidates [standing] in different wards and I myself was one of the candidates [for the Social Democratic Party]. … Unfortunately, I couldn't come through but my colleague managed to win a seat. At that time he was the only SDP candidate who won a seat.

[In 1986] the Labour Party lost the control of Tower Hamlets [and] the Liberals and SDP took control. SDP was the Socialist Democratic Party - that's the breakaway from the Labour Party [led by] the 'Gang of Four' - David Owen, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers and [another person]. But subsequently the Liberal Party and SDP merged and formed the Liberal Democratic Party - the LibDems. … Subsequently, … we joined the Labour Party

15. Industry and Trade Unions

Dan Jones
The local Trades Council had a … very proud tradition of anti-fascist activity going back to the '30s – [to] the 'Battle of Cable Street' and all that sort of thing. As an organisation of local trade union branches, we were engaged with a lot of concerns from the mid-'70s, particularly in patterns of racial violence and the growth of fascist activity of various kinds and sorts of territorial claims.

The things started with small beginnings … there were attacks and incidents of rampaging [and] thugs running down Brick Lane. There were demonstrations after that. The police had arrived after an attack had happened and windows were smashed and glass everywhere and angry shopkeepers have come out with brooms and sticks, and they got arrested. So we had a whole lot of arrests happening I can remember.

We had some community organisations against such kinds of violence. These tended to last for [only a] few weeks. The Tower Hamlets Alliance for Racial Justice was the [main] organisation which collapsed and then we formed another organisation with the same people. There [was the] Bangladesh Welfare Association and Bangladesh Youth Movement - they were established groups. One may be surprised to see the help from interesting bodies like the mosque - the Brick Lane mosque, [which] offered facilities and help and support. The East London Mosque also supported us. Lots of people from circles that we were most surprised to find … engaged in helping.

Aloke Biswas
The struggle that we see … was a class struggle. Because every time (this is where I am bringing my political understanding) the capitalist system reigns all over the world, its job is to make money. And all the fat cats and the people we always talked about, they are the capitalists - their job is to make money and the system needs worker to come and work. But when the capitalist system is in crisis, it sheds its work force [and this] is still happening even today. You know the motor industry workers are loosing their jobs. You will not find any steel workers, because the steel industry doesn't exist. The mining community has collapsed and gone; [the miners] have been just thrown out.

During that time, they pointed their fingers [at] the Black community and said that these are the people who are responsible for the economic downturn. I am talking about 1975-76. You will remember that the 'Winter of Discontent' [at the time had] nothing to do with Black and White. It was the capitalist system in crisis; the workers were fighting to defend their standard of living. The Labour Party was supporting them, and we were saying that we need to find our place to fight along with the British working class.

So it was the class struggle [but] the symptom presented was as Black and White. But we always fought and said: "It is not the Black workers, who are … responsible. Not Black people, Black workers." [We stood] firm and fought along with the working class and the trade union movement … The rest is history because Margaret Thatcher came into power in 1979 and the trade union movement does not exist now, although there is a substantial number of trade union organisations … But during that time Asian workers played a very important role in shaping the trade union movement. … They came basically from fighting against racism, but that then became part and parcel of the greater trade union movement. Asian women were fighting on the ground. In Ford the Asian workers mobilised themselves, Asian workers in the foundries in Midlands.

And then came a force, which is the Black youth, and that's entirely a different discussion. It must be analysed in its political context which is entirely different. [I am] not prepared to go into this, because the Black young people came and said: "We are not prepared to take this and we will have to fight for our jobs and so on." … That is entirely a different discussion but during the '70s, what we saw [was] the Asian worker finding their rightful place within the trade union movement. …

The trade union movement were slow initially but … we really forced them to get involved and the Asian women stood up in 1974, So by that time it was all Asian people standing up and saying: "We are the workers, we want to come and we want to work here and we want to take our rightful position within the trade union movement." That was our aim to place ourselves in the middle of trade union movement, because we [were] workers basically and that was my argument. We have come here to work and have a livelihood and at the same time make ourselves a better life. We want to do that and we are doing it, we want to defend that. … [When] Len Murray the TUC (Trade Union Congress) General Secretary, came [to power] … after a year in 1975-76 he visited Brick Lane. [It] was really nice that a top trade union leader came round to see what was going on and we were able to talk to him during that time

John Eversley
Clearly there has been a clothing industry in the East End for very long time. That industry had flourished in the inter-war period and at that time a lot of the workers … in the industry were Jewish and a lot of the workshops became unionised. The traditional production was of women's trouser wear, dresses and coats. After the Second World War the industry was still there but it had been incredibly damaged by the blitz and a lot of the places decided rather than use the buildings they have been using to move out of the East End into purpose-built factories and so on.

To some extent the labour force moved with them but [workers] were still cheap in the market, but the skilled end of the industry tended to be held by the older workers and very often Jewish workers. So they would be the pattern cutters, cutters and [doing] all the bits that had value to it. Gradually Bangladeshi men came in as unskilled workers, machinists and pressers at the bottom end of the industry. The bottom end in the industry means bottom end in terms of skills and bottom end in terms of conditions. So a lot of the places that they were working in were not owned by Bangladeshi firms initially. They would … also do garment work at home. And it was very easy to rent a machine at that time, and if you rented a number of machines you could set up a business, just sewing one part of the coat or the dress or whatever. So you do [the] least skilled bits of it and get paid very little for it. And there [was a] vast amount moving around between one workshop and other in order to complete a garment - there wasn't much money to make out of it.

Gradually what happened was that people would take over more of the process and they will get people and youths to complete the garments, so they have more control over the total cost of the garment and so on. But they didn't have access to any of the formal training in order to do the pattern cutting or the more complicated cutting and finishing. That's were the money is to be made. If you get extra pieces out of the raw material you can make more money that way. At the same time they didn't have any control of the whole process. There were lots of middlemen who were organising the relationship between the wholesalers and [between] the wholesalers and the retailers. And certainly in '78 to '81 Bangladeshis were not involved in that. It was a very significant thing that … the people, who were involved in that, were on Commercial Road rather then Commercial Street and were Indians, not Bangladeshis, and the relationship between them was not very good.

The other thing, which was very interesting, was that in 1945 after the war, there was no great leather industry in the East End and [it] hasn't [ever] been part of the East End manufacturing picture. Somehow, in the '60s or '70s leather production started and that was something that Bangladeshis uniquely did. I don't know how it started but it wasn't something that has been significantly done in the time of Jewish clothing industries. It wasn't something Indians were involved in … but it was something the Bangladeshis developed. So certainly in 1978 there were lots of jobs to be had but the key issue was [how we] were going to improve working conditions and pay … You have to get control to the production process and produce higher value products.

I did not know the first thing about the clothing industry when I came but we got a lot of help from some activists in National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers. And people in the Bangladeshi community recognised that what we had been told was right and so we set up the training workshop and began strengthening their skills. In 1981 there was really a big collapse of the market for the clothing industry we are talking about. There were cheap imports partly from Eastern Europe and partly from the Far East. It was evident that there were no production jobs and people became unemployed. Therefore, it became a more pressing question whether it is right to train people in the clothing industry. If we are going to train people in the clothing industry, it had to be the higher skilled jobs, otherwise we were just training people who were unemployed. And so the training workshop changed what it was doing.

[To find] out quite how bad the crisis in the clothing industry was going, the Council paid researchers to go on knock on the door of every workshop in the East End to find out how many people worked there, what they were doing and what they saw [as] their prospect. I organised that survey jointly with the Tailors and Garment Workers Union and what was then called Queen Mary College. We visited [homes] and we worked with the group of Bangladeshi people we visited. The vast number of workshops [were] visited and it was the most comprehensive survey done on the industry in 30 years, and we really found out a lot about what people were doing and how people were doing. It demonstrated what an important source of employment it was, but also the people who were at the end of the industry which was most under threat from changing buying habits by the retailers and changes in the world market for clothing.

Subsequently, what happened was that manufacture locally became less and less important and all people were doing the finishing jobs. They were putting labels on the products which were being produced abroad. And eventually when the Multi-Fibre Agreement came to an end, which was regulating international trade, there was very little market for the kind of things that were being produced in the East End. By and large, what we have got now is the wholesale [trade], which [deals with] certain products that have been made abroad and if there is anything that is done with local machines or [if] finishing [is] done, it is really quite minor by comparison and it is no longer the great source of employment as it was.

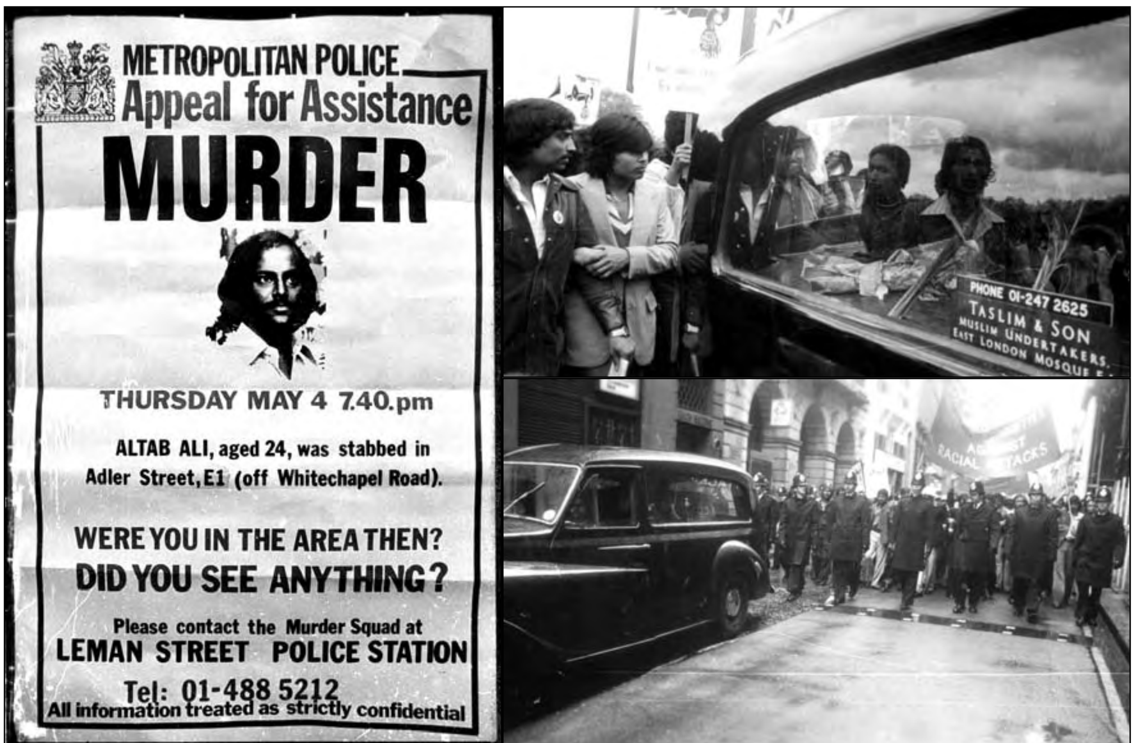
Very few places where a significant number of people worked were purpose-built factories. They were usually built as both people's home and as work places. So the now extraordinarily expensive Georgian houses and silk weavers' houses were originally intended to do weaving on the top floor, where the lighting was very good. But what happened was [that] the buildings were [completely] made over to small workshops and there would be noisy sewing machines. Then the pressing machines put out a lot of condensation heat, the cutting table which although very suitable for cutting material but were not good for people's backs, so there was a variety of physical conditions that were not good.

The pattern of production in the industry was not evenly spaced out over the year … In particular, the wholesalers' buying habits increasingly became only to order short runs of things and to order them in the last minute as the stocks were running low or see what was popular. So the pressure to produce a lot of dresses or coats or whatever was [intense] … and it meant that if there was a sudden rush, you just have to work all the hours that there were in order to do it. And then a couple of weeks later there might not be any work at all because demand of that particular garment had collapsed or whatever. Any kind of notion of long term agreement from the wholesalers and retailers to even out production was not there so people were forced to work in those hours.

The other thing that the pattern of working does is that in one moment you might have a place which is absolutely full of material and garments, so every fire exit [is] blocked up with rolls of cloth or stuff on hangers ready to go out and then it might all disappear. It did mean that places were firetraps and it did mean that if there was a rush on … it was very overcrowded and there was no rest at the end of the day. There was no place where you could go and have a break. The toilets [were inadequate] because the places were never designed to have so many people working in them. And there was no training being offered for people, so they were not taught safety practices. They weren't taught the ways of doing things that are most economical with the cloth, which means there was more wastage, which means less profit, and pay had to be worse and so on. Although it was a vicious circle, that's how the industry was organised … for a very long time.

Young people helped out in their family businesses and they might do that after school or some might bunk off school and do it. I guess some of the youth worked at home where their mummies were doing machining. I don't personally have huge memories of children working. I think that some of that actually would have happened and some of it was that the White visitors were not very good at judging that how old the people were quite frankly. So I think [the child labour issue] may be exaggerated and I do think that people left school early to earn a living. But also at that time very few people were leaving Tower Hamlets schools with sufficient grades to go on to higher education and certainly I remember [that] in the later '70s and early '80s the number of kids who were getting A Levels in Tower Hamlets was tiny and that means they have no chance to going into university. … So the only jobs that were available at that time were clothing and catering. That's what people did. That's what the boys did. For the girls they had even less to choose from.

16. The Procession after Altab Ali's Murder, Protests and Other Public Events



Altab Ali police appeal poster and coffin procession, 1978. © Paul Trevor.

Rajonuddin Jalal

[The procession after the Altab Ali murder] was a very emotional event. Thousands of people came out - never before did the Bengalis come out in such numbers. [It was] emotional in the sense that the event was not organised by the people, who are professional in the political field. It was a spontaneous community response to a happening. It was raining heavily on that day and still you had about ten thousand people marching from Whitechapel, - Altab Ali Park - from the corner of Brick Lane through to Hyde Park corner via the House of Commons and back again. That was the day when the Bengali people felt that, we were no longer to be treated as immigrants (people who temporarily come in this country and they will go back).

Kenneth Leech
[The procession after the Altab Ali murder] was very moving [but] it didn't stand alone. There were many protests, many marches in that period. It coincided with the rise of the then National Front, which has now withered but in those days it was very strong, so that, the two things were going on simultaneously. A number of very well intentioned White activists, who joined in the procession, … treated it is a march and they started chanting: "Fascists out, fascists out, fascists out." And I remember some old Bengali men just looking at them with great disapproval and they didn't say: "Shut up." But they just looked as if to say: "It is a silent procession and not a political demonstration" and they were reduced to silence. This is extraordinary. I have never seen the SWP reduced to silence so quickly. It dawned on them [that] this was mentally a commemoration, was mentally a silent witness to the death of Altab Ali.

Nooruddin Ahmed
The emotion [after Altab Ali's murder] was that everyone had a tremendous sense of loss, that we have lost somebody, a compatriot. But the other important factor was that you feel a sense of insecurity. But because there was enough and sufficient number of people there with the similar kind of feeling, we felt a sense of protection as well, a sense of solidarity. So [on the] one hand you fell vulnerable but on the other hand you feel you are not alone. There are other people as well, willing to give you all the protection required [at] that time. You need physical protection or just a pure political support … as well. There was a very strong sense of community developed from there.

And [at this procession after the Altab Ali murder] there were not just people from East London or from Tower Hamlets. From all over East London everybody came and people from other parts of London came as well. Some people spent not hours, even the whole day; even some people spent the nights just to be around here. There was a time we needed to patrol the properties. [The] National Front … wanted to occupy Brick Lane to say that: "Yes, we have taken the heart … of the Bangladeshis away from them". And the Bangladeshis felt: "No, here [is] Brick Lane [which] we have to protect". … Obviously youth were at the forefront but then Bangladeshi elderly were equally involved. … People from the other communities played a crucial role as well, providing both, moral and physical, as well as political support.

Akikur Rahman
[The meeting after the murder] was organised by myself and [other] colleagues ... It was called 'Black Solidarity Day'. We had one of the biggest demonstrations of this kind by the Asian community. I think about 7,000 people turned up. Restaurants, all the factories everything was closed and we said: "No, we have to show our solidarity." People [came] from Southall, they came from Birmingham, they came from Manchester, people came from all over the county to join this, because we [have] got to say "No" to the racism. At that time racism was so strong all over the country. It was not only in Tower Hamlets, it was all over - Bradford, Southall, everywhere it was going on.

We organised that meeting. At that meeting lots of MPs were there, some of our characters like Tariq Ali - these are the people who were nationally known. They all came and we had a meeting, and I was conducting the meeting. I didn't have a clue how I am going to do with them, because I had never organised such a thing. But on that day our elderly [colleagues] like Tasudduq Ahmed [came] … and I asked him to conduct the meeting, but he … told me to do the job. It was a critical situation. The people were really angry, they were fed up, people [had been] abused in the street, and people got killed. And there was lots of police as well. There were about three thousand police around. Everywhere there were police.

We did have a carnival in the Altab Ali Park, we had music and everything as we can.
The important thing is [that] we [have] done it. … We had people like Bhajan Chatterjee and the like. When the National Front … used to come in and distribute their leaflets, the police can't do anything, they didn't stop them. So we thought the only way we can get rid of them [was to] go early in the morning, and … occupy their place. So on the Sunday market, we went first there. There was a conflict between us and the National Front. Somehow we were strong so we pushed them out. The police came and said: "All right, first come, first served" and since then we always go [to the] top of Brick Lane from Friday evening until Sunday evening [to] occupy the place. We [did] it for about six months.

So what happened? At that time there was an elderly guy, Fakhruddin Ahmed, the best community leader and community worker we had. He used to come with a flask of tea and everything in the night time, when we are at the top of Brick Lane … He was distributing tea and everything to us. We had lots of people with character then. He is no longer with us. I can see these people with my eyes closed, what they did for the community.

At that time my idea was to let the people, who don't know what was going on, into our society, especially those in parliament and internationally. We were recognised by the United Nations, I think. Because all [the] national newspapers … were carrying our news and Brick Lane … became an international focus [at] that time all over the world. After the demonstration … everybody took notice [about] what was going on. We are not like Southall or like Bradford. [This is] … not a tourist area … If anything goes really wrong, it will be bad [for] Britain. So obviously there was much concern. All the Ministers came visiting us, they put in a new police station and things like that. So everybody was running around. So 'Black Solidarity' is one of the breakthroughs, to really [hit] hard … the racist movement.

Aloke Biswas
Our initial task was to form the public opinion, because the National Front came right on the doorstep of Brick Lane. We were there on Sunday morning on the top of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road [where] … they would be selling their racist paper and mobilising the White racist community. [They] would then spend time on the Sunday afternoon in the pub and then their job was to go out and fight Asian young people and [get] themselves involved in beating them - what they called 'Paki bashing.'

So we have to organise the public opinion and we had to talk to the young people in Brick Lane and we had a tremendous amount of support. There was the core group of twelve young people, I can name them and some of them are well-established now … Akik, Shirazul Haq, Konor Ali, Rafiq, Jalal Uddin and so on. These are the young people who came and we organised a regular meeting and we organise a public demonstration to say: "We have come here to live peacefully but at the same time, if we are attacked, we see this as our job to defend ourselves." That was the slogan: "Defending your community is no offence" [and] "Self-defence is the holy responsibility of every single human being". The young people stood up and said: "We have done nothing wrong, we will defend our community."

On one hand … we had the community meetings going on [while] on the other hand, various organisations were formed – the Bangladesh Welfare Association, the [Bangladesh] Youth Movement, the [Bangladesh] Youth Front and so on and so on. Then we had all the Asian organisations that we brought with us from Hackney. We all got together at Naz Cinema Hall - it is gone now - and we used to hold meetings there. We [also] used Toynbee Hall. On the pavements, on the streets … we would be holding public meetings and then distribute our own leaflets and so on. … People were waking up to the fact that we are here and we can't runaway and we [have] got to defend ourselves. At the same time we kept saying that we want to hold peaceful discussions with the trade union movement, the Labour Party [which] was in control of Tower Hamlets and so on. And that paid a dividend, and I am very pleased to say that it did work in a very positive way [to] bring about the safety and the security of the community, Asian community in general, and particularly the East London community here.

Mark Adams
I first came to Tower Hamlets … in the late spring of 1978 on an Anti-Nazi League demonstration, which was a national demonstration against the rise of the National Front, because they had a massive vote in [a] 1977 by-election. I think it was 15 per cent of the vote they got. There were a lot of issues [going] on up and down the country but particularly in Brick Lane and [at] the end of Brick Lane there was a battle going on … every Sunday morning … in self-defence. I was a student in Cardiff at that time [and] some of us came down from Cardiff to join the demonstration. We marched from then West End through London down Bethnal Green Road and into Victoria Park. We had a 'Rock against Racism' organised by all the musicians from different backgrounds and one thing that stuck in my mind from the visit was [that] when we passed a pub down the Bethnal Green Road that was called the 'Black Boy', just about 100 metres going east on the northern side of Brick Lane, … outside was a group of drunk fascists. Even [though] we were 80,000 it was scaring, intimidating and there were scuffles going on and the police was there just to block it off … It was a very positive demonstration actually. I didn't know anyone in Tower Hamlets then and we went back to Cardiff.

17. National Front

Kenneth Leech
The National Front was, in a sense, doomed to failure from the start in my view. It was bound to split, because when it was formed, it was formed in 1966-67; and it was the first post-war racist political party, explicitly racist. There was Mosley and his British Union of Fascists in the 1930s. After the war it changed its name to the Action Party and later to the Union Movement. But that was the pre-war phenomenon, which by the 1960s had withered to a few old men standing on various street corners in the East End.

The National Front when it formed was a merger of three already existing groups, who have nothing in common really, except they all hated the Black people. There was the League of Empire Loyalists, which was in the strict sense not a fascist group. It was members of the Conservative party, the far right wing of the Conservative party, who believed that the Prime Minister MacMillan had sold the British Empire down the river. So they were old Conservative imperialist rather than straight forward fascist, I remember them very well. The secretary of the League of Empire Loyalists was a student at the King's College, London - his last name was Walters.

The second group was what I would call Christian fundamentalist racist - a group based in Sussex and Brighton called the Racial Preservation Society. They were categorically called fundamentalist who believed that Black people, including the Asian people, were condemned by God, that they were an inferior race to the White races. So they were kind of religious racist. And the third group was quite openly pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic, and a group particularly called the Greater Britain Movement.

Now it was bound to fail at one stage, because these groups were ideologically completely different; but they all hated Black people. So they came together and they formed the National Front and as it developed it became more openly Nazi and more openly anti-Semitic, particularly they saw the Jews behind everything, although they were anti-Black. The real villain was the Jews; they blamed the Jews for the Blacks. Posters used to appear produced by the Anti-Nazi League. They said: "Hitler blames the Jews, Tindall blames the Blacks." They were trying to make the contrast between the pre-war and the post-war fascist group. That was a good slogan but it wasn't historically correct. They both blamed the Jews; the difference was the post-war group blamed the Jews for the Blacks.

They didn't grow very rapidly in the first few years, and one of the reasons why they didn't grow was [that] Enoch Powell appeared on the scene in 1968, just as the National Front has formed, with his 'Rivers of Blood' speech when he warned that Britain was going to move into a phase of unrest or violence because of the presence of Black people. Powell was a much more respectable mainstream politician, a former Minister of Health. He recruited a lot from the West Indies to run the National Health Service. He was very well known and Mrs. Thatcher thought he was wonderful and so he was quite different from the National Front. So he really stopped them from growing, because a lot of people, I think, took the view that if Enoch Powell in the Conservative Party holds this view, what's the point to voting some tin pot group of people, who they have not ever heard of.

But they started to grow, and they grew particularly in the East End. The two areas where they grew most strongly were in Hoxton from the northern edge of the East End, the area of Whitmore Estate at the top of Hyde Road, the border of Islington and Bethnal Green. They were the two areas with significant growth of the National Front and they took over a pitch in Bethnal Green Road and started selling a newspaper that was started in 1975-76. There were certainly strong correlation, in my view, between the presence of the National Front, particularly during the Sunday street market, and the increase in violence. Not necessarily the National Front was behind the violence, although there were examples where they were, but more in the sense that they made the violence respectable. They gave [it] credibility.

They used to meet in a particular pub regularly and so the period of growth was basically the mid-'70s until 1979 general election, when their vote collapsed everywhere. And I think the reason for the catastrophe was Mrs. Thatcher, who took a hard line against what she called the people of an alien culture. The same thing happened but on a much bigger scale as it happened with Enoch Powell. People said: "Well, if Mrs. Thatcher holds this view, she wants to get rid of the Blacks too. What is the point to vote for the tin pot little fascist group? She will do the job better." …

So part of what I was trying to do was to alert people in other places [about] what was going on. And most people didn't know where Brick Lane was. I remember at one point, enormous demonstration taken place, and people came to London from all over the country. But they didn't know were they were going - they just knew there was trouble around Brick Lane. And I remember a group of teenagers, very well intentioned, I don't know where they came from, but they travelled a long way and they were wearing badges: "Brick Lane against the Nazis." The trouble was they couldn't find Brick Lane and they came to me [saying]: "Could you tell us the way to Brick Lane?" I don't know whether they thought it was a town, not a street. … So you had a lot of people converging on the East End in the morning. By the Monday morning they moved out again.

So something have to be done to make sure to change the scenario. The hostility to racist organising was locally rooted. It was fine that they people coming to march and demonstrate but then they went home leaving the people on the spot to deal with issues for the coming week. So something had to be done at the grass roots level. …

I was chairman of the Governors of the Church of England Primary School in Bethnal Green in the '70s, which was just by the National Front pitch and I remember a headmaster coming one morning, almost in tears, and he said: "What on earth do I do when seven year old children come into the playground on Monday mornings chanting 'Sieg Heil', 'Sieg Heil' and making Nazi salutes? They don't know what the word means." And I realised that (it was obvious when you thought about it) that the young people - and some of them were very young - they were as young as seven and eight, and called themselves the Young National Front they were precisely the kids the church youth clubs had thrown out, the scouts and the cubs has thrown out, that the probation officers had despaired of. ...

Cathy Forrester (Peters)
We had some nastiness in Brick Lane with the National Front, because they used to stand at the top of the Brick Lane [on] … Sundays. We, the community, [thought] … that they shouldn't … [do] that. … We … held a big meeting in the Montefiore Centre. We had so many people attending that meeting that we could not get all of them into the centre. … There [was] a lot of violence at that time. I got myself beaten up and arrested by the police. I was actually a youth worker at that time and I was at … [the] Montefiore Centre. …

[The members of the National Front] were not brave enough to come out and say to me that they were [from the] National Front. … Some of [our] neighbours didn't like the Bengali families [coming] to their area. … When a flat became empty, some local kids [went] … in there and smashed the flat up. I have even stayed in a Bengali house over night, where they threw brick [stones] through the windows, because they didn't want [to have] a Bengali family [in] … that flat. … The family … ended up moving from there, they were too frightened. …

Bengali boys [went] up the road, just last year. They kicked me and everything. It was maybe a mugging. My son has been beaten up. And I can't believe it. … My son was born in Brick Lane as well. ... In a way that shows how things have changed. … The youth of today is a big problem here for … Bengali [parents].

Nooruddin Ahmed
I think [the skinheads] were both local and from outside. The important thing is to look at the mechanism played in terms of organising them. There was an organisation, it was very resourceful and very organised - the National Front at that time - and that was the organisation which was behind the scene. And, therefore, the skinheads that came here were not all local people - there were lots of people from [here] as well. … They used to organise themselves outside Tower Hamlets - when and where to meet and where to attack. … Yes, it happened sometimes [that] two people [would] get together [when they] saw a poor Bangladeshi or a Black person, swear at them or abuse them or attack them. Those kinds of things … happened but when we talk about rampage in Tower Hamlets or along Brick Lane or Cannon Street Road, these were very well orchestrated and very well organised and the National Front was behind them. … [Whether] skinheads were National Front members or not, they were motivated and organised by the National Front.

Rajonuddin Jalal
Back in 1960s you had the 'Paki' bashers. There is a section of the British community that feels that the Black people don't have the right to live in this country. It's a small minority. So in the '70s and definitely in 1978, the National Front was complaining about the presence of the Bengali community [and] … basically saying; that they were losing jobs to the Bengalis. Bengalis were taking housing away from them. … This was a racist campaign and they would have repatriated the whole community if they could have. If Enoch Powell had his own way, then not only the Bangladeshis [but also] the Asians and Blacks would have been repatriated. But the racist movement was defeated by us, and that is a reality, because I think the situation is such at the moment that this country will come to a standstill or [operate only] in certain parts of the country without the presence and the participation of the Asian and Black communities. Many of the National Health Service establishment, many industries will not work without the Black and Asian people.

Aloke Biswas
On the street what was happening? The National Front was distributing their racist literature. They were mobilising the young people. They would go into Bethnal Green area, they would drink in the pub and they would go and beat people up. That was their job in Sunday afternoon. There is also the 'Paki' bashing. But then there began a reaction from the Bangladeshi young people and the Asian people. They stood up and said: "I will fight you." The police began to get worried. I still remember the 15th of June 1975. We were having a meal in Brick Lane at about 3.00pm. … We had done our street meeting and suddenly somebody came and said: "We are being attacked." We rushed to the scene [at] Hanbury Street junction and looked right where the Truman's Brewery is.

We saw some two hundred fifty young people, all of them White, and they were marching right through Brick Lane. We had no other option but to shout and say: "Today we will defend Brick Lane." So young people came out and there was a pitch battle. We had milk bottles and there was … hand to hand physical fighting. They were more then 250 in number and we stopped them there. Then only the police came [and] beat us up. The police threw me on the bonnet of a car and said: "We are sick and tired of you." I said: "What are you talking about? We have been attacked. It is our home and we have not gone anywhere to attack someone."

That was a big day. We were taken to the Bethnal Green Police Station [and] some of the White thugs got caught as well. But what happened [was] that the Bangladeshi and the Asian people realised that our community had [been] under attack and so on. And we had tremendous support. People began to march and then in July 1975 we organised 15,000 people marching from Tower Hamlets, going to the Bethnal Green Police Station and Hackney. Black and ethnic people marching and coming together and we had about 30-40 thousand people. ...

From there on we had the vigilante group. The police hated the vigilante group; they hated it and hated us. The vigilante group [involved] groups of young people going out in cars, … visiting their own area to see whether the White gangs were going round and finding single individuals or groups and trying to beat them up. They had wooden sticks in the boots of the car to defend themselves. There were no knives … because police might get them and charge them for carrying offensive stuff. … So suddenly we saw the situation transforming. The young Bangladeshi people were saying: "We will fight you." And the police came and said: "You don't need a vigilante group. Leave your security in our hands." Lo and behold we had the police station in Brick Lane. We objected to that but they had the little … station where they had police people on the Saturday and Sunday. Sunday was the market where all the people from all over the world came. And they had a police station to protect us. At least we have forced the police to say that: "Yes, they need to be protected as like any other people." That was seen as a victory.

Jamal Hasan
Although the anti-racist movement was becoming stronger and stronger, we didn't gain the upper hand until the killing of Altab Ali. This incident took place on a local election day, with people around everywhere and yet a young married man with a child was killed in broad daylight by a racist who got away without being caught. After this terrible incident, there was a new sense of urgency in the movement, who became desperate to eradicate racism in East London.

The incidents in the East End became a national concern. Every Sunday we used to have demonstration. It became a ritual that, every Sunday we had to be at the end of Brick Lane, near Bethnal Green. The National Front would be on one side of the road. Shouting and screaming would go on every Sunday at 10am.

Len Murray was the General Secretary of the TUC. In those days TUC's General Secretary was quite a powerful person in the country. One Sunday, Len Murray joined us in the corner of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road. Mr Murray's participation saw the situation change to some extent.

Everyone, not only the National Front, but also the establishment started to take us seriously. As soon as Altab Ali was killed, we decided to stage a national demonstration.

Mithu Ghosh
There were regular things happening, because National Front was still quite alive and kicking then, even in the mid-'80s. … There were still legal battles going on about them not [being] allowed to sell Nazi pamphlets and I remember all that. Maybe they weren't as aggressive anymore because the Bengali youth were getting stronger. But I remember in the '80s, what used to happen was [that they would come into] Bengali restaurants [and] go off without paying and then police were called and they didn't do anything. That's right. It was more to do with the establishment, the police and their lack of response, rather than National Front themselves. … In the '80s [it was] more a struggle [against particular individuals] rather then against the group [itself]. They [had] gone underground but they were still orchestrating things in the background.

Terry Fitzpatrick
At that time the National Front [was] organising in Tower Hamlets. Racial attacks were not directly the … result of the National Front itself but it was the National Front [creating] a climate of fear, if you like. One of the things that I remember about the 1970s was this huge violent confrontation on the street. There was a massive battle in Birmingham … and the National Front could put thousands [of] people on the street for a march. … They saw that the way to raise racial tension was activity on the street. Street activity, totally the reverse of what the BNP does now.

I can't think of a single National Front member who was ever convicted … of instigating a racial attack. But what they did was, they created an atmosphere, in which … [they said towards the] families [who] moved in there: "Let's go and kick them out. Let's go and smash their windows." So [that was] the other [phenomenon], apart from the homeless Bangladeshis, who wanted to squat. … People just [had] given up their turns, saying kids couldn't go to schools, women would have their sarees pulled off in the streets. People were just abandoning the tenants. Even I lost the count of the number of rent books I have taken back to the council and said, here is another one gone.

John Newbigin
The 'East London Advertiser' never chose to really present the Bengali community as anything other than a problem … during the 1970s. That was partly reflected in their letter's pages, where they would say [that] they were simply reflecting the concerns of their readers. But they ran all kind of letters [where] people complained about the strange people with strange smells in their cooking and strange language and strange habits and their strange children and so on and so on. Caroline Adams wrote a little book which compared the letters people wrote to the 'East London Advertiser' in the 1970s complaining about their Bengali neighbours and the letters which people wrote to the [paper] 60, 70 and 80 years before that complaining about their Jewish neighbours. And, of course, the terrible irony is that the language they were using was exactly same. It's the fear of the unknown. Because people were talking a foreign language, that means they are talking about you, they are plotting against you and all that kind of paranoia came out.

I don't think the 'East London Advertiser' was a responsible newspaper. It didn't challenge the behaviour of the police or the local authority. It made very little attempt to explain to its readers what were the problems of the community, what was the recent history of Bangladesh, what people were doing here or anything like that at all. I wouldn't like to comment on what the [paper] right now, but in the 1970s it was certainly part of the problem, not part of the solution.

18. Racist Attacks

Akikur Rhaman
At that time … if you walk in the street, or something like this, [White people] are not very much aware of your culture. They would say to us: "Look at this, look at this." sniffing with the fingers on their nose. This attitude was not right. Obviously, we couldn't speak very good English on that time; obviously we just take [these] things as abuse at that time. But later we did understand. There were lots of people, [who] hated us all the time, because they can see another community coming into Tower Hamlets, and they feel that [this community was] taking their homes. … You can see this from school, when they children used to say: "Paki! Paki!" – that's the sort of word they used. Obviously, they learned from their parents.

Since we were kids, when they say "Paki", which was bad, we said something [back] so there was a fight. It started from there. Even probably in 1974 or '75 there was a student who was killed round in this area. They were Chinese, they were coming out from the takeaway, they were attacked by the local White[s], and I think that was a racial attack. So obviously there was a problem [at] that time. But as you see now in Tower Hamlets, we are a large community, but at that time [we were] a very small community - say about few thousand people was there. Even when our elderly goes to the mosque, the English kids used to just pick their hat off.

Rajonuddin Jalal
I was a victim of an attack. When I went to fun fair in Cannon Street Road behind Mulberry Girls School I was attacked by a gang of White youth for no reason at all. [This was] back in 1978 [when] the size of the community was not very big, and it was that evening late [when] Caroline Adams, a youth worker, went to my rescue. That was my own experience. I also had involvement in supporting people who were victims of attacks. … We used to live in a place called 'The Hostel Number 7' near the Tower of London. A group of single men used to live there including myself and there was a chap called Terry Fitzpatrick, Irish himself, and a great supporter of the Bengali community. Whenever Bengalis were under attack he would go and pick us up. A small number of young people who used to live in that hostel would come with him in a van and we will go support people who were victims of racial attacks.

There were many occasions when the thugs belonging to the National Front will be rampaging through places like Brick Lane and Cannon Street Road, and we would organise groups of young people to go and physically fight with them. There have been many battles that involved physical assaults between the National Front and us, and eventually we did drive them out of the area. It was a battle for survival.

Aloke Biswas
Asian people were being attacked by the racist element of British society in the early '70s in the name of 'Paki' bashing. That was the first time that the term was coined and every single Asian [person] was seen as a Paki, irrespective of their country of origin. What really prompted this reaction from the British racist organisation is that the people from East Africa … were beginning to come to England, because the British made a mess out of the whole thing and the Asian people who were holding British passports felt that England was their place. We all know about Uganda and Idi Amin Dada, when he threw out the Asian population from Uganda and some of the African country followed suit. And as a knee jerk reaction all the British racist organisations … decided to frighten [people] and the people were really beaten up and they were attacked in the middle of the night, their homes were attacked and people coming from work after ten o'clock at night, were attacked and killed. In Hackney there were two people attacked and one of them died.

One of the things that is coming to my mind is the role of the police. Of course, you will say [that] people have been beaten up and murdered so what were the police doing? Obviously we turned to the police, because we are peace-loving people. We didn't want to organise in a violent way. But we went to the police, and the police took an attitude that: "What can we do?" For example, people were attacked in the middle of the night through the letter box [by] a petrol-soaked cloth or some kind of element or paper was put in and a match stick was [lit] so there was fire on the doorstep, and this is from my own experience. We went to the police and the police said: "Do you know who has done it?" How could we know, because it happened at one o'clock in the morning. They said: "Then what do you want us to do." We said: "You go and have an investigation. What do you do if somebody gets killed? You go and investigate." They said: "If you don't tell us, how can we do that?"

That was the very negative attitude police had. And we accepted that and there was the time when we said: "Right, if you can't defend us, we will have to defend ourselves." So we were there in the middle of the night and we challenged those people who were knocking on the door or trying to break down the door and so on. The police were called and we then said: "Yes, we have identified those people." And once we identified them only then the police went.

John Newbigin
[I witnessed racial attacks] many, many times. This is an example, which is not in the East End. In the summer of 1978 we had quite a good kung-fu club running then - there were two or three Black belts already - and they wanted to go out of London. We used to do a lot of camping trips in the weekend. We went camping in Gloucestershire and because everyone was working - everyone worked in clothing and leather factories in Brick Lane - so a lot of people didn't finish work until 8:00 or 9:00pm on Friday night. We got in the minibus, we drove down to the M40 to Oxford, and we pulled into a motorway café and it was full of people and it was very surprising for them to see 15 young Bengali men and myself walking in. After about 20 minutes a coach load of young men - I guess they came back from a football match - arrived there. They came in and said: "Sniff, sniff - we can smell curry in here." They started staring us in the eye and everybody else in the restaurant just began to move away and then they began to throw furniture, began to throw plates and cutlery and all the staff in the restaurant just disappeared in the kitchen. That was a very bad situation, that's what it was like.

I remember seeing kids being beaten up in Brick Lane. It was certainly impossible to go into a pub away from the immediate area of Brick Lane without effectively getting involved in a fight. If a White man came with a Bengali man, people would shout, abuse and threaten you. It was very, very open. And particularly the summer of 1976 was bad and the summer of 1978 was going to reach a climax. There was a good deal of open intimidation on the street - women and children being shouted out, people having bricks put through their windows, shit put through their letter boxes, cloths drying on the line would be cut with razors, cars would be damaged. An incredible level of violence and the response of the police was absolutely pathetic. Very often the police did virtually nothing.

One of the roles of the youth organisations was, in fact, to provide some kind of protection for the community when things were very bad. It was extremely unpleasant. I remember an old Jewish man saying to me: "In the 1930s it had been safe for Jews to stay south of Cheshire Street on Brick Lane [but] the north of Cheshire Street the chances are that we will get attacked. All the pubs north of Cheshire Street are basically National Front pubs." In the mid-1970s those same rules of demarcation that have been applied to the Jews were applied to the Bangladeshis, and if you went north of Cheshire Street the chances are you were at risk of attack. It is incredible to think about it now but it was like that. Not all the time, but particularly in the summer time [and] a lot of tension in the street on weekends.

Sunahwar Ali
[I was attacked a] number of times, actually. Once I was in school, I was attacked by five to seven girls and two boys. I was beaten up very badly in the school corridor. Then one of the teachers took me to the hospital. My father stopped me coming to the school for two and half month. That was one of the incidents. … We used to live on Hackney Road and just behind the children's hospital, and every time I used to go out, my mother used to be near the window, looking for me when I am coming, because the racist young people used to attack me on so many times. They used to break our windows.

Suroth Ahmed (Faruk)
In 1972 Bengali people used to avoid the Wapping area because of fear. Most people were afraid of Bethnal Green. Today I am living in Ingram House, this was an area marked for enmity to Bengali. People were unable to go to Wapping even for work. Some parts of Ingram House were marked as no-go area to the Bengali people.

The racists don't need provocation; I can remember an incident. Syed Nurul Islam and I went to enjoy the second film of Bruce Lee, 'Enter the Dragon'. We went to the Warner Cinema … in Leicester Square. We were living in the hostel at Tower Bridge at that time. We went to enjoy the cinema and after the show we were coming back to the hostel. When we were returning to our hostel, we reached the underground rail station of … Charing Cross … [and] we saw a few middle aged, rough White people; we felt that they were not good people. We watched them and got in another compartment just to avoid them. When we sat in that compartment, they came to the compartment and start beating us in front of the crowd in that compartment.

I was unable to understand what was going on but Syed Nurul Islam protested them. When he stood to defend [himself], they caught him and took him to the door of the compartment and were beating him. Then I stood and protested. I was asking them what the problem was. One White gentleman tried to protest them but his wife stopped him and it was sure if he had protested, he would have been attacked also. They threw Nurul Islam on the floor and were still beating him. I asked them, what our fault was. They told us nothing but left us soon. At the next station all the passengers of the train left the train including Nurul Islam. I realised I was totally alone in that compartment when the train came to the next station. I left the train and came back to Nurul Islam. Lot of the people complained [about] the incident to the police but no one contacted us. There were a lot of racists among the police also.

I remember another incident that took place in front of No. 7 Toc H. There was a technical college on the other side of the road. We were playing cricket [and] accidentally the ball hit one of the window of the college and they called the police. The police came and treated us very badly; they were adamant to arrest us and as if they were confirm that it was a criminal act where it was just an accident. But we called Peter East immediately and he came soon and tried to calm the situation. There were many incidents like these, as we were unable to talk to the people and the police.

Nooruddin Ahmed
I won't claim that I had been personally attacked that frequently. A couple of times there was someone abusing me. You don't pay attention ... [because it was] just expected and [you] just walk away. But it happened more in 1981, when I was physically attacked. … I [was not] alone. A group of us came out of a meeting, protesting about a racial incidence on a Bangladeshi family in a housing estate. It was in the evening, when we came out and … we found other Bangladeshis were being attacked. We went to defend [them] … and we were attacked. Especially Jalal and [I] … were attacked quite severely. I needed to go to the hospital because I had received a blow on my head. It was nothing very serious but because the blow was on my head, I just went to check it. It was only one incident but I know [about] many [other] incidents and the volatile situation of that time.

Later on in '81 … I used to work for the Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Justice. I was one of the field officers responsible for monitoring the racial incidents and promoting racial harmony. So at that time I knew how Bangladeshi families used to be attacked and the sense of insecurity, especially you can see the fear in eyes of the mothers. When their children [have] gone to school they will have the anxiety. Will they come back home safely? Some of the housing estates used to be no-go areas, especially in the other side of Commercial Road. The Teviot Estate, Lincoln's Estate, Glamis Estate. There was [also] a place in Stepney Green [which] used to be a no-go area for Bangladeshis.

Kenneth Leech
Sundays were the worst days for racial violence; because that was when the National Front used to turn out in force and take a whole park or pavement. And they would abuse verbally and sometimes physically, not just Black people, not just Bengali people but anybody who looked different, who didn't look as if they were National Front supporters. Because the stereotype of what a good patriotic British citizen should look like was White, short hair, and large boots. And if you didn't fit that stereotype, then you will be abused, whoever you are. So people, who looked like students, would be abused, White people with long hair would be abused, people who looked as if they might be gay. How the people looked gay I don't know, but they thought they might be gay, people wearing Anti-Nazi League badges, or almost any badges apart from the Union Jack badges - all were abused.

There was certainly an increase in attacks, an increase in the climate in which attack was seen as more acceptable in that period. During the 1970s and particularly towards the end of the 1970s, areas with a physical danger were the area north of the railway bridge in Brick Lane, the old borough of Bethnal Green, and the area in Bethnal Green itself and going up into Shoreditch - that has been a dangerous area for Jews in the 1930s but much earlier at the turn of the 20th century. There was a markedly sharp divide and you can hardly see any Bengali people north of the railway bridge and north of the Truman's Brewery … Once you cross the railway bridge and Bethnal Green, you are in an area where the racists are organising. And you hardly ever saw Bengalis, except in groups of about ten or twelve going to English classes of the Bethnal Green Institute because that's where the English classes are.

So I don't feel most Bengalis would have wanted to go to Bethnal Green at all. They have to go there for English classes but they went in groups. They regarded [Bethnal Green] as alien territory, unsafe territory, as the Jews have done in the earlier period. So there was very much a geographical connection and I think that has remained although the geography has changed. The areas were going to be more dangerous for Bengali people were the Isle of Dogs [but] that was later in the '90s.

19. Housing, Gentrification and Ghettos

Nooruddin Ahmed
We have to look at the old picture of Brick Lane or the East London. The whole area used to be very rundown to start with. There were lots of empty properties but on the other hand there were people who were living in very poor conditions in overcrowding conditions. There was very little investment in the housing. … People … with some political mind thought: "What a waste of resources! You let the people suffer in polluting conditions yet you are leaving properties empty. This can not be done." So people started squatting … [to] put pressure on and as a result an organisation called the Bangladeshi Housing Action Group was formed. … There were a number of other squatting groups as well. Sometime it … worked [and] the Council said: "Now we can form housing associations. If you can take over charge of this, you will receive some grant, you can get grant from other places." And among Bangladeshi housing associations the Spitalfields Housing Co-operative was the first to be formed. …

Almost half of the houses were under the GLC - the Greater London Council - and we tried to put people in there by squatting it because our people … don't have anywhere to live. We had to give them some accommodation. Squatting was not illegal at that time. … [Our squatting was reported] in the local newspaper and that started a real problem in Tower Hamlets. [The] other community thought [that] we are taking their things away and they started a conflict. And especially at that time when Altab Ali was murdered, we the Bengalis realised [that] we [facing] serious problems.

Kenneth Leech
I think it went back quite a long way because, before the Bengalis were in the East End in significant numbers, it was very clear that Black and Asian people were under-represented within council housing. There was a study by one of my friends called Elizabeth Bernie, which came out in (I think) the early '60s, called 'Housing on Trial'. She is still around. And she said that virtually all the Black people she could find in the East London were in rather decrepit private rented or privately owned property - hardly any were in council accommodation. By the time the Bengalis came that had started to shift. They were most part in the Worcester Estate and on some estates where there was a good deal of racial abuse. One of the difficulties that the Bengali people had in the mid-1970s was they did see some parts of the East End as very unsuitable areas to be in and very unsafe. Most of Bethnal Green was written off and they didn't want to be in Bethnal Green, so you got a concentration in the Spitalfields area, where there was a certain amount of safety in numbers. And although there were rampages [by] 'skinheads' through the area, eventually they petered out, and Spitafields actually became a relatively safe place for Bengali people because they were in the majority.

So there was a twofold problem. One was a problem, [which] was beginning to affect the population as a whole, was that there was no more council housing. And so the East End housing situation became very polarised with the very rich and the very poor, and in a sense nobody in between. In the middle of Spitafields, which still has the highest rates of overcrowded housing in the whole of the UK, you have a street of millionaires. I give [the] example of Fournier Street, where two American stockbrokers live. It must have needed ... millions of pounds to buy those [houses] and they decorated [them] spending another million. It was a palace. I was astonished to see once I was there in the house, because it was three minutes walk from my flat, and it was a completely different world. I went to see it in 2003.

The interesting thing is that is their third house. That's not their main house. Their main house is in New York City and then they have another house in Western Florida. …And Fournier Street joins Brick Lane and Commercial Street, it has the Bangladesh Welfare Association and the mosque [at] one end, and it has Christ Church - the Spitalfields church - at the other end. I think people in the Bangladesh Welfare Association and the priests of the church are probably the only people on the street who are not millionaires. In between you have the artists and all sorts of people.

So you have the very wealthy, who are the only [ones] who can afford to buy the private property, and then you have the very poor and the relatively poor. But the people in between - people in the middle income groups - couldn't get a foothold so you found a lot of ordinary people, Black and White, having to move further and further east. And that problem has got much worse, much, much worse. As I was preparing to leave East End after 46 years, the estate agencies were trying to abolish the entire East End all together. They were calling it 'City Fringe.' You can see advertisements in estate agencies windows, [which] … say 'City Fringe.' So there was a very clear policy among the estate agents in attracting yuppies to come and live in Whitechapel and prices going up and up and up. …

I [refer to] yuppies because there were two housing processes, [which] were often confused. [One was] gentrification and [the other] was yuppification, [which is] not quite the same. The term gentrification was unknown until my old teacher Ruth Glass invented it in 1959 in a study of housing in North Kensington. She warned that if this process continued whole areas of London would become way beyond the reach not only the poor but also of the middle income groups and everybody except the very rich. That has already started to affect the East End - I would say within the last 10 to 15 years. Now gentrification refers to very rich people buying up old property and gentrifying it whereas yuppification is a different phenomenon - it refers to the building of new luxury houses and flats for the new rich and for the intelligentsia.

Now that's not being going on in Spitalfields, because there is not much to build, but it has been going on in Wapping, down by the river and in the Isle of Dogs, where all the private property is at the luxury end of the market. There was a period in the Docklands area during the life span of the London Docklands Development Corporation, when unemployment continued to rise among the local people, with one exception – [that] of security guards. They were employing local people as security guards to look after the empty luxury flats. There was a period when even the rich couldn't afford to buy them.

So there was a cluster of processes, which made life extremely difficult, particularly for the more recent immigrants. And it not just affected Bengalis - it affected Somalis very seriously, who were a much more recent group and, unlike the Bengalis, don't have a great command of English.

The ghetto controversy was largely a misunderstanding. … It was a fairly typical bureaucratic mishandling of a real complaint. What had happened was that a particular group of Bengalis – I don't know how reflective they were as a community as a whole, … called the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) – gave a list of the properties to the Greater London Council, where they would feel unsafe and another list of properties, where they felt that they would feel reasonably safe. There were mostly in the Bethnal Green area, which bordered the areas were Bengalis were already living. This is I understand was misunderstood or may be understood very well but the policy was wrong; they decided to set aside certain housing estates for the exclusive use of Bengali people, which was not what BHAG had asked for. What they had asked for was to be housed in areas where they felt safe.

So it became [known] then as [the] ghetto [plan]. But the interesting thing was that it brought together groups who previously have been opposed. The BHAG said: "This is not what we asked for, you have misunderstood, we don't want a ghetto. What we were talking about is housing where we feel safe." … The White population was up in arms as well, because they said: "It is unfair to reserve a whole block just for Bengali people, what about us?"
So people who, in fact, have been quite hostile to one another realised that they were agreed against the Greater London Council. … And the Bengalis and the White people in Spitalfields virtually started working together, although they were still keeping their distance - they were a bit wary of one another.

So that's what it was all about really. I think it was a clumsy misunderstanding. I am always wary of the use of the term 'ghetto'. I always put it in inverted commas, because that's what it was called. But I think, to use the term 'ghetto' in a racial sense in Britain, is extremely confusing. Anybody, [who has seen] the ghettos of American cities, will never ever use the term 'ghetto' about Britain. When you go to the south side of Chicago you can walk for miles and miles and miles in some areas and never see a Black face. And you can walk for miles and miles and miles in other areas and never see a White face. I mean that's a genuine ghetto. What people call ghettos in London and in Birmingham are basically very small areas, which you can walk in and out in a matter of five minutes.

The real problem of the ghetto, if you want to use that word, … is to do with class and wealth rather than with race and colour. … You have whole areas of London, which are so expensive that only the rich can afford to be there, and these are the real ghettos. … And I don't think this for the most part follows colour line in the precise way they are doing in the United State. … [The ghettoisation issue] didn't last long and many people now have forgotten about it. I was in touch with … a very distinguished professor of geography - he is one of the leading experts on demographics - and he never heard of it. He was too young to remember it. So it came and it went really, but it was quite important … in … [reminding] some Bengalis and some White people that they really needed to unite for decent housing for all the people. So it did actually bring groups together who previously have been each other's throats.

Rajonuddin Jalal

The housing situation was pretty bad, because initially what you had was single men and young boys and … people used to rent house from private landlords. … We had people living in squalor. Often you would find four or five people sharing the same room in shifts, … because people couldn't afford to pay for the whole room on their own. But later on the housing problem [got worse], because a larger number of families were joining the single men who had come to settle here back in the '60s and '70s … and that created a significant housing crisis. [There were] a large number of homeless people. There was a shortage of housing [but] at the same time you had a lot of empty homes. So once again, we were able to help a lot of people through the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG). …

Spitalfields residents reject GLC's 'ghetto' housing at a public meeting, 13 June 1978. © Paul Trevor.

Terry Fitzpatrick, Khoshru and few other people would squat places and [sent] homeless Bengali families to stay in those places. And in that way the squatting movement started. … Later on housing became so much of a crisis that the [local] authority started taking notice. So for the first time Bengalis were getting houses [through] council accommodation and the housing associations became active as well. But there was a time when you would have literally thousands of Bengali families who were not only [on] the housing list but were homeless as well.

BHAG was simply just squatting places to provide accommodation for homeless people but there was [also] a Ghetto Plan, which was introduced by the Greater London Council. [The plan] was opposed by the local community, but the reality is that when people tend to be concentrated in a given area, … they turn out to be ghettos anyway, whatever your desire is. Because a lot of people were seeking public housing and [could] only be re-housed into council properties in Tower Hamlets, the consequence was that you have a large number of ghettos. Ghettos have served their own purpose as well, because [they] have provided cultural services that you would not find anywhere else. You would get your mosque, your community language classes, and your cultural centres in Tower Hamlets. These would not be possible if you would be a smaller community living in the outskirts of London.

Aloke Biswas

There were numerous numbers of empty houses under the Housing Department [but] they couldn't repair them. These were the houses they were offering to the Asian community. These were the houses the White working class community will not go and live [in]. They were done up [and] there were basic security and safety. And the Asian community accepted the houses, because you see in our history [if] you give us something we will make it something nice and good. … Any situation or circumstances, because of our philosophical attitude towards life is such. … Whatever you give us, we try to make the best of this. … Some of the White community will say: "No, it's not good enough for us." … [but] we will say: "Right, this is good enough for us." So it was not that we were taking up three bedroom houses with a garden - we never had that, it is all dilapidated houses

Jamal Hasan
I have to mention here four people, one local, but not Asian, Terry Fitzpatrick, three from outside, two of them Asians, Farukkh and Mala Dhondy and one Afro Caribbean, Darcus Howe. These four people got involved very successfully with a long term project which, to my mind helped enormously. These popular four started a housing co-op by squatting in a huge Council building, called the 'Pelham Building'. People of all ages regained the spirit of community feeling and became politicised and found it easy to revolt against injustice. Darcus Howe was the editor of 'Race Today' Magazine and was a well known anti-racist activist. These four people helped to politicise a huge number elderly Bangladeshi people by involving them with Housing Co-Op, called 'BHAG' which in Bengali, coincidentally means 'Tiger' The effect was magical!.

John Eversley
I wouldn't say that the experience of unemployment and housing was the same for established White community and the Bangladeshi community. [The] most basic difference was that by and large the White community was already in Council housing. And the basic amenities of the housing was better, this meant that they were living in homes that had some kind of central heating, and inside toilet, that wasn't shared with another household. Where as the Bangladeshi community at that time was generally not in Council housing and that means they lack those basic physical facilities. Although the pressure on housing at that time wasn't as intense as it became later. The issues about allocating the Bangladeshi in the worse kind of council housing and so on were only beginning to happen as I recall at that time. There weren't many Council houses at all. So it was the squats and it was formerly privately owned terraced houses and so on that were been used.

Mark Adams
[The first campaign]... we started … was the Homeless Families Campaign. Quite a lot of Bengali families were homeless … [and] were mostly put into hotels by the Council around Finsbury Park. The hotels were quite unsafe and dangerous and there were quite a lot of accidents, in fact. In 1985 there was a Bengali woman and a child who were killed in a fire in Westminster Hotel. This provoked a … campaign by homeless families and … many of them were Bengali. The campaign got massive solidarity and support from all of us down here. … We literally went down to the hotels and invited the people to meetings at the [local Asian] Centre. We got a really good turnout … [with] a group of about 50 families and from there we started campaigning for better conditions in the hotels and re-housing, because the council was trying to not re-house as many people as possible. That was a struggle that went on for a long time. …

Eventually after seven months we [held a] meeting at the Town Hall with the chairman of the Housing Committee, who was … an old Labour [councillor] and a teacher. He was the brother-in-law of the Leader, Paul Beasley. … I never forget that meeting in the end of '79 or early '80 at the Bethnal Green Town Hall. … All the families were there with us, also our Ward councillor, Geoff White, who was a trainee barrister… and we were talking about probably the worse housing conditions in Brick …And we actually managed to get a lot of people re-housed. We could [support the tenants] because we had a legal service. We could [stop] any messing around, any crooked action and so on. …

In Spitalfields itself not everybody was in slum clearance areas. Some people were in private accommodation [and] had no chance of re-housing. [They lived in] the most dreadful conditions. So we used to go and knock on the doors and talk to everybody. Zafar, Osman and Alauddin and others. ... We met some amazing people there. I remember one Askonder Ali. He was involved in the liberation war [and] was a formidable character. He told us his story of escaping the Pakistani army by hiding in a river … He became a founding member of the Spitalfields Housing Committee. … Although the committee was all-male, women were very active and … we had separate meetings of the woman members. … We got some architects [and they formed] a housing association [and] got some money from the Housing Corporation … to improve the housing.

But how to improve them, how to design them, as well as to build some new ones? You know Ahmed Fakhruddin? He was one of the founder members. He was a close ally of Tassaduq Ahmed. He was incredibly brave as well. He was the backbone of SHAPRS (Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service) [and] he used to get … stick from people but he would face them and face them off. He was a kind of rude person politically but he was still fighting, putting up a lot of stuff and paving the way for the younger generation. He worked very closely with Jalal, Shukur and others. So [a housing cooperative] was formed and we had very good meeting with the [female] members and the architects. They actually changed a lot of the designs of the new houses, in the way they would like it … By this time we had another woman worker joined us called Rumi Altaf. She became a social worker and social work manager and various sorts of things. She [like me, also] started in SHAPRS.

John Newbigin
One of the issues for the housing authorities was the business, which [was] completely unprecedented where a man might be a single man and therefore not eligible for housing. The next day his wife and six children would arrive from Bangladesh and he go back to the housing office and say: "Now I am a married man and have a wife and six children, I need a flat." The housing system simply did not know how to cope with that. There were various attempts made so people were being moved out, a long way out of the area, where they did not feel safe [and] where it was not possible to buy *halal meat* and so on. People, having sometimes [been] re-housed to areas like Poplar and Bow, would come back and prefer to squat in and around Brick Lane, because they felt safer. They felt they are closer to the mosque, they were closer to their shops and closer to their friends. …

There was a terrible lack of understanding and a lack of sympathy from the housing authorities. In 1978 the GLC, in response to this growing crisis, developed a new policy, which was [known as the ghetto plan]. … To its enormous credit the community said: "No, that's not what we want at all. We want decent housing and we want to live with our neighbours and we want to be part of a wider community but at the moment we can't because it is not safe and there is not appropriate housing available." That was when the Spitalfields Housing Cooperative began to establish itself and I think the housing [cooperative] was one of the really important breakthroughs in terms of looking at housing in a different way – raising the quality of housing, giving people confidence to demand better housing and also forcing the GLC and Tower Hamlets to rethink its housing policy.

You could say the … overwhelming force of the racism that was around in the late '70s was driven by poor housing, because White families were also under pressure with housing. So when families were coming from Bangladesh and the White people thought: "How come they got it ahead of me? … This guy came from his country three months ago and he has got a flat ahead of me." And the reason was because the man had six children, so he had a more urgent housing need. But all those kind of tensions were knocked up very cleverly by the Tower Hamlets Housing Department or the GLC housing. …

It was serious and that was how it was and Terry Fitzpatrick was somebody who began to organise the squatting on a very big scale. Pelham Buildings … was an entire block of flats, which he squatted in one go and that was housing for probably 80 families. This area round Brick Lane … which is newly built housing was then just corrugated iron. It was … empty housing blocks which were bomb damaged [and had] never been replaced or slum clearance which has never been replaced.

[People preferred to live in Spitafields]. I went to a family that I knew, who lived up near Columbia Road and they were re-housed to Stratford, and they were quite worried about the new housing and I went in the first weekend they moved out to see them and see how they are getting on. … There was no milk in the house so the boy was sent out to get milk. We all set around talking. He didn't come back … for an hour. I was quite worried … [and asked]: "What do you think happened to your son? Where he has gone to get the milk?" So from Stratford he came back to Brick Lane to buy a pint of milk, because … he was too scared to [go to] any of the shops anywhere between Brick Lane and Stratford. For me that was a fantastically powerful statement that how people thought they were strangers … They didn't feel it was safe, they didn't feel it was for them; a terrible, terrible story.

The housing issue is absolutely crucial to [other things as well]. The White families of this area were living in very, very poor sub-standard housing. They had been affected since the war. 60,000 houses were destroyed by bombing during the Second World War in the Stepney area [and they were] never been adequately replaced, and there was terrible pressure on housing and there was real resentment that there was such competition for housing. Also there was competition for places in schools because there was such an influx of young children when the Bengali families began to arrive. Also there was pressure on jobs and the sense that the clothing trade [was] not a job that people particularly wanted to get into, but nevertheless it was work. And there was a sense that the Bengalis took over the trade and they were keeping it for themselves.

Sunahwar Ali
Those days there were problems of housing and homelessness. … Then in 1979 the Spitalfields Housing Co-operative was formed and [Fakhruddin Ahmed] … realised that if some of the property was bought by the housing co-operative and there are shops below, the housing association can't do anything [about] the shops. He proposed the formation of an organisation solely responsible for shops and workshop units. That why a sister organisation was formed – the Spitalfields Small Business Association. The housing co-operative will be responsible for the accommodation side of it and the … [association] will be responsible for the shops and workshops and so on.

Now the Spitalfields Small Business [Association] is one of the landlords in this area, which has reasonable rents and they provide a lot of support to their tenants and also the cooperative at present may worth an estimated £10 million. Otherwise those properties could have been gone to private landlords and private entrepreneurs and it could [have] represented more [of a] threat for the Bengali community in the area. … [Now] there is [the] threat of the City trying move in this direction and forcing lot of people to move from here.

Terry Fitzpatrick

In the Tower Hamlets [Council] all 60 councillors were Labour … [and] power was divided between the Jewish and the Irish. ... A small core of councillors and Council officials ran the borough - there was no democracy. [There was a lot of] corruption, particularly in housing. Tower Hamlets at the time [had] the greatest concentration of publicly owned housing outside of … Eastern Europe, [since] about 90 per cent of all housing was state-owned [though] the GLC or Tower Hamlets. … The Labour Party operated a … sort of ghetto system. [If you were] Bangladeshi … you could get housing if you were registered [but] you could only register, if you had a family here. So a single Bangladeshi man couldn't even register for housing. In order to get their family here, they had to have housing, otherwise the families wouldn't be allowed in. So people were doubling and tripling up, sleeping on people's floor and in flats where they shouldn't be.

There wasn't very much private housing at all. What there was was around Spitalfields, Cannon Street Road and that end of the borough. [There was] massive overcrowding but, at the same time, the Council were operating a very inefficient [housing system]. Not only were they corrupt, they were extremely inefficient. And I remember writing a leaflet, saying that there were 3,200 empty council owned residential properties in the borough, which would be enough to clear the entire housing list. There were whole streets of houses - some of them were not in very good condition - which gradually began to be occupied by Bangladeshis, with the assistance of White squatters especially after I got involved. …

In 1976 we found a block of flat just behind the Montefiore Centre, which was called Pelham Buildings. There were 60 habitable flats and there were about 7 or 8 tenants left. The building was due to come down and it now has been knocked down. We then decided to do a mass occupation. So on Easter Saturday 1976, myself, Farrukh Dhondy, and four or five Bangladeshi activists, because by this time some of the younger guys was started to come into the movement. … We broke into Pelham Buildings with the first seven or eight families. … and about the end of '76 we had 300 people in the building. The last tenants moved out and there were more or less 300 Bangladeshis and me.

We coined all sort of phrases like "Self Defence is No Offence" and "Blacks Pay Tax for Roof with Cracks"… [We also squatted in a] street owned by the [Royal] London Hospital … Tower Hamlets was going to buy the site but they said to the London Hospital, "We want vacant position" meaning … "You have got to kick the Bengalis out." So we … occupied the Council chamber when there was a housing committee meeting going on in 1976. We all assembled in the gardens by Bethnal Green and about 100 people marched up to the Town Hall which was in Bethnal Green then. And we got the Council to back off. … The grass roots [of the] Labour Party was totally racist and wanted to see the evections take place. But they never [succeeded and] we never lost a single squat between 1974 and 1979 or 1980 when it came to a sort of end.

[We also faced] a whole series of demands. One of the demands was: "Bangladeshis have the right to live in areas, where they feel safe." It cannot [depend on] the whim of [an unelected] housing officer … [However], Tower Hamlet [Council] was saying and the GLC: "Well, we cannot have you dictating housing policy." And we were saying: "Well, we are not dictating housing policies, this is what our members saying, this is what the Bangladeshi community saying. [They] don't want to live in some racist estate on the Isle of Dogs."

So by the early part of 1977 we had too many people. We had put down deep roots in the community. … In the May elections of 1977 the Conservatives took over the GLC, which previously been Labour. ... We thought that we are going to have problems [but] out of the blue the GLC announced [that] they were going to have a squatters amnesty. The GLC was not concerned about the parts of London where the squats were going on, because they didn't vote for the Tories. They [were concerned about] Outer London where there was no squatting going on. [Squatting] was an Inner London phenomenon and it was a Labour Party problem, so they didn't care.

We then started negotiating with the GLC, [saying]: "We represent X number of people who have scouted in your property. We want a meeting." We were then invited to a meeting with the GLC to discuss the whole thing of Bangladeshis squatters and the rest of it. ... We [expected] … a fight [but when] we met the GLC officials, they just said: "Yea, anything you like, where do you want to live?" And it was agreed. We prepared a list of estates which was acceptable to our members. Everybody squatting to the GLC property would receive one offer of accommodation on those estates. .. So we went back [and held] a whole series of meetings in Pelham Buildings [and elsewhere]. … We had a huge map of Tower Hamlets on the wall of my flat and we went round all the estates … and said: "No reasonable offer of accommodation will be refused." And we went back to the GLC with that.

Starting at the end of 1977, the GLC started to clear all the empty properties. [The] local [housing] office tried to sabotage it but we … went over their heads back to the GLC and [warned them that] because the BHAG had become [so large], we can pull a thousand people out for a demonstration - it had become a centre of power. A lot of Bangladeshis didn't like to see non-Bangladeshis [leading] it. We never intended it to happen, but it just happened. But I was ready to move to other things [and] … we pulled out. … We were glad it was coming to an end.

Clare Murphy

I spent a fair [amount of] time contacting people … [about] re-housing, repairs and anything like that so I actually formed a group to do something about it. … By about 1974 there was … more enthusiasm for confronting the authorities in one way or another. Spitalfields was unique in Tower Hamlet for people were working on housing issues [because] it … had so much bad bombing during the war, which made for redevelopment. [Some] blocks [which survived the bombing] didn't have even a kitchen in each flat [and] many of them didn't have a bathroom or they might have to share a toilet and so on. So in 1974 there was a big meeting of local people in the Montefiore Centre [and] they decided to start taking up issues with councillors and local authority departments. … The Spitalfields Community Action Group (SPAG) was formed and Michael Miles was one of the chief spokesmen.

During that year Caroline Adams had taken over as the Asian [outreach] worker from Ashok Bashu Dev. Caroline had a much more community development view of how to tackle things so I coordinated with her to try and involve some Bangladeshi people. … It was a little bit of …tokenism in a way, because the Bangladeshi issues were fairly different from the issues of the White working class. Caroline was simultaneously working with a number of Bangladeshis, many of [whom] were affiliated to the Bangladesh Welfare Association. Her work was with Bill Blair who, at the time, was a social worker and they were addressing the need for some facilities for Bangladeshi people to go to, when there is a cultural event … And then about three months later they formed a group called the Bengali Housing Action Group.

The meetings were held in public, which was a little bit of a farce. You had all the people on the top table discussing certain issues they have put on the agenda and people disagreeing from the floor of the meeting. … It was very obvious that there was a bit of fobbing off [involved since] the funding that was allocated [did not go very far]. .. The intention was [that] this official group of people … would try and force the various local authorities to put redevelopment or whatever Spitalfields [people wanted] ahead of the agenda. So [the money] given was never meant to build houses or very expensive things, or improve schools - it was meant to help things along.

I suppose it did have [some] success. ... There were a number of playgrounds that were enhanced by the funds, but then that was partly because various of the officials were dedicated to try and find something that was obvious - sort of see that something was happening in the area. ... The atmosphere that was going on did, in a way, … encourage people to come out and protest a bit more if they are living in horrible housing. [It also encouraged people] to go and visit Council meetings and make their protest and [draw up] petitions. And that was good because, it then meant that the councillors who were delegated to sit on the Spitalfields Project meetings, had actually got some evidence of the need for getting a move on. In fact, as the Spitalfields Project [proceeded], it began to open up a bit more so that there were fewer councillors. And then as different community groups became stronger, a representative from that community group was asked to go along.

So after the initial five years phase, the Spitalfields Project had this new structure and by that time there were quite a number of different Bangladeshi groups that had actually found their feet. That would have been about 1980. [By] that time … a number of Bangladeshi youth organisations have been set up. [They] were doing a variety of works, a lot of key welfare work, accompanying people to benefit offices and things like that, when they were unable to put their own case. So that was the beginning [of] quite a big change.

One of the things the Spitalfields Project was able to fund that was very, very useful was the organisation called the Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service (SHAPRS) and that employed a solicitor and two co-workers. … Charlie Forman and Mark Adams were the two co-workers. The reason for [SHAPRS being] set up was that … one of the chief problems in the area, even though the Spitalfields … Project was going for five years, was related to housing. And very often the housing issues had some [element of] law or policy … So with that rather specialised team, it was possible to take up the issues of re-housing, repairs and sometimes labour harassment. …

In the…areas around [Fournier] Street …., the houses [had become] totally neglected. … [In many of them] sewing machines were rattling away [and] it almost felt like the sewing machines might fall through the floor … at some point. Gradually with the slight upturn in the property market, one of the local estate agents was trying to up the rent and get people out in order to [redevelop them for up-market businesses]. … So one of the thing SHAPRS also took onboard was the squeeze from business to move into the area. The irony is that by stopping some of the office planning commissions … the new Georgians came along so that you got one by one people who had the patience to do [these houses] up and [compete] with each other [over] how authentic the pigment of their paper was!

However, before that, there were some well-meaning people, who would come to Avenues [Unlimited] to see if there is any way we [can] interest the Bengalis, who use the old Georgian houses, in doing them up. Because these were the people who knew that there were grants available and so forth. The very nice classical Georgian houses were falling down [but this was not] a matter of interest to those people. … They probably [didn't have] the capital and even if they had it, they would have other things in mind, [such as] sending it back to Bangladesh.

Even so SHAPRS had quite a number of victories with helping people and it was very, very busy and very popular from the word go. It is one of the best things that came out of the Spitalfields Project but [when] the funding was dried up … they could not continue. [SHAPRS employed] three [Bangladeshi] workers, who were quite outstanding. … One of them was Ala Uddin who is now the chair of the Spitalfields Housing Association. Another one was Osman Gani, who is also on then Board of the Spitalfields Housing Association. They had Shishu Choudhury. …

Osman [spearheaded] an approach on re-housing, [which involved] registering Bangladeshis to vote. Caroline Adams organised the registration for voting. [People would] knock on doors and ask the people their names … and explain why [they were] asking for their names ... Registering for voting is an example [but] there was a lot … of other things, where there were a sort of chipping away [in order to] break down barriers. Some Bangladeshis might have been a bit … frightened about seeing an official in the doorway … because of years of experience. There might be an immigration officer very often on their doorstep … examining passports, whether they are here legally or illegally. The officer had sometimes asked about the number of residents in the home. There are stories that the officer might be asking that: "There should be two people here and I can see six pairs of shoes so there must be six persons here" and so on. So that there would be some slight reason why the officials hadn't a wonderful reception. … So we all did a lot of that sort of work with people to make Bengalis seem like normal human beings and [we used] people who could speak the same language equally well.

Abdus Shukur

When I said that we were involved before Altab Ali, the reason was, at the initial stage we were involved in finding homes for Bangladeshi families who were overcrowded. Our first interaction was to help people who were overcrowding by taking over some empty properties, squatting them with people. That was one of our first elements - fixing up the electricity and doing various things for them and then moving those families into those houses.

So we then looked up at a range of organisations like Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service. I was its chairman for a long time. That was an organisation that was looking at the rights of young people to have decent homes and especially with the community boys and looking to find them good accommodation, working with the Council, arranging different issues. You will have to look at the background people like myself … were coming from. In the late '70s and early '80s I was one those that handcuffed themselves to the Homeless Persons Unit. Ten years later I was sitting on the other side as a policy maker, making policy decisions on homelessness! So you will have to look at the perspective and the views that we were coming from, looking at how we were going to develop and take that element forward.

20. Integration and Exclusion

Dan Jones
Some of those exclusions still operate, I guess, in the field of employment and housing and access to anything. The Bangladeshi community lost out on whatever provision there was. They lost in the queues for whatever ought to be picked - right across the board. We had terrible acute housing, big housing problems, and lots of other aspects as well. In education, and all sorts of areas, they didn't know how the system worked.

Akikur Rahman
In '70, '71 … I was trying to integrate in the society. In the same time we had other problems as well, because [at] that time our heart was in Bangladesh. We had newly come into this country and we had a problem … back home. So obviously our minds were not stable on that time. [We were] thinking [about] both worlds. In here I used to work part time in a restaurant … [On] the weekend we didn't have much time. Every time in 1970/71 we had meetings going on for Bangladesh.

Syeda Rowshanara Choudhury Shelly
I came here in 1981 when there were very few Bengalis here (Manchester). We had no Bengali family near us. We used to feel lonely but the restaurant, in which my husband used to work, was near our house and my husband used to come to the home regularly, and the other people who were living in the area used to come frequently, so I was not feeling too bored. Also the area I was living in is very good. The people of the area used to like me and they used to bring our children home if they were outside and unattended. When I was late to bring them from the school they used to bring my children to my home. They knew we were the only Bengali family in the neighbourhood. We faced no problem in the area. This was [such a] nice area.

Syeda Rowshanara Choudhury Shelly with her husband and child before coming to England.

My son and daughter were good students, they were regular in their school and the social workers took good care of me as well. When I was interested in learning the English language, as it was important for me to solve the problems of the banking or in the post office or in any need of the daily life, they came to my home to teach me English. I learned English for about two years going to a class. At last I learned enough English to solve my jobs with the bank or the post office or in the school of our children. I was able to communicate with my neighbours in case of any complaint or any need.

Gradually my children grew up and they completed their study [at] … university. I am happy with my children as they have a good reputation in the area, in their school, college or the university. No one has ever complained against my children [and] they have never been involved in any kind of fighting or quarrel. I am happy and thankful to Allah. I have four sons and daughters now. All of them are educated and well established. My eldest daughter has got married to an engineer who lives in Bradford. I [also] have four grandchildren.

… When I came, my daughter was only four and my son was two years old. In a few weeks after our arrival they took my daughter to the school and I got busy taking my daughter to the school and bringing her back after the school. Here we were the only … Bengali family and there [was also] one Pakistani family. When we used to meet, we used to say "Salaam" instead of "Hello" - it was a nice feeling. I was able to understand and speak Urdu and some other Pakistani family came in the next five years and I made some friends [with] them.

21. Younger Generation

Cathy Forrester (Peters)

The teenagers, the kids are not the same. … Not only the Bengali kids, but in this area, there are mostly … Bengalis. … [These] kids of today are running gangs, … they fight one another and they kill one another. That's the sad thing about it. … One of the biggest problems … nowadays [are drugs]. Some Bengali girls are taking heroin. … I don't know where the heroin comes from - they say 90 per cent of the street heroin comes to UK from Afghanistan. Years ago there were still drugs in the area, but not on [today's] scale … and we did even have heroin addicts, but they were registered with the GP. They [didn't] go out and [steel] in shops or peoples' mobile [phones] to get their heroin, because they got [it] on their prescriptions in those days.

Cathy Forrester (Peters) with friends in the 70's.

Kenneth Leech

People I worked with are now people who are in their 40s and 50s and onwards. I mean they were teenagers when I knew them. My main link with the much younger groups comes from the fact that for five years I was the founder governor of the Kabi Nazrul Primary School, which was the result of a long struggle. Because if you live in between the Whitechapel Road and Commercial Road there was no school, no primary school and so wherever you live you have to cross the busy main road, which could be quite dangerous. And so a group of us campaigned for the opening of a primary school in between those two main roads and eventually the Kabi Nazrul primary appeared and it has done very well.

At a time when adult literacy for the general population was very low in Tower Hamlets, at the Kabi Nazrul the children, at the age of seven, were at a stage that the government was expecting [children] to be at the age of ten. I was incredibly impressed with the political consciousness of the children. I was working particularly with the age group of seven and eight years and on their way to school they have to pass the derelict Tower House for homeless people and by the end of the 1990s it was squatted by heroin and cocaine addicts. It's very interesting that the seven and eight year old Bengalis were coming to school and saying that: "Why are there homeless people in Brick Lane? Why does not somebody do something about that?" And their teacher - a very bright woman - decided that they will do a whole project on homelessness, historically and in its contemporary forms. I think they wrote letters to the Council and found out who the owner of the Tower House was. They were, in fact, quicker than I was in gathering information!

I was very struck by their astuteness. Now I am sure that [this astuteness] is not [found everywhere]. [However], Mulberry Girls [Secondary] School, which is overwhelmingly … Bengali, … has one of the highest rates of university entrance in the whole country. So, on the one hand I am very, very impressed with what I saw. On the other hand … it would be stupid to deny that the Bengali kids - like kids of any other group - are getting into drugs and are getting involved with inter-racial violence. I used to see this a lot in Altab Ali Park, because there were quite often conflicts between rival gangs. So of course the Bengali youths are not angels, but I think that compared with a lot of the White young people, the literacy rate is astonishing.

There was a rather silly man who stood as a local candidate for an obscure party in the area, in his election leaflet he said: "Well, of course, the Jews integrated. They spoke English and the Bengalis don't. They just speak their own language all the time, they don't speak English." This is extraordinary [because] the children of the Kabi Nazrul speak English, Bengali (Sylheti) and, in some cases, Arabic and, in some cases, French. They are far more versatile than the general population. And that's an old complaint. … People said [the same] about the Jews in the 1950s. …

I don't know what the future is. I see signs that there is a kind of decentralising of the community from Brick Lane. People are moving out, which is what has happened with groups … historically. [There are] hardly any Jews left in Brick Lane and the East End, although once 95 to 100 per cent were Jews, Eastern European Jews. What will happen to the Bengali community in the future? I don't know. I have already seen in the North-West [of England there is a] quite sizeable community, who are ex-London [so] I think time will tell.

Rajonuddin Jalal
The younger generation … [has] a huge responsibility. They are no longer seen as immigrants that have come to work in the country or in this area. They are seen as the torch-bearers for the future. They are seen as the custodians of the community for the future. By this I don't mean just the Bengali community. Many of them are going to achieve through education and they are going to be in important positions in society. And they are got to make sure that they can respond to the needs and aspirations of all sections of the community and by doing that they will prove that the Bengalis are capable of looking after not just themselves but other communities as well.

Dan Jones
Not…so long ago, [those] who were little children [are] now paunchy middle aged chaps with their own children and grandchildren. In lots of cases I think the world has changed in Tower Hamlets a great deal. If you actually look at who are members of the Council, both Liberal and Labour councillors, I guess a good third of the people were involved then as activists in some way, helping the movement. Not an MP yet but who knows? That even may happen one of these days shortly. In terms of access to facilities and in terms of work and education, the story is [one] of extraordinary change. The new generation is coming through. If you go to a school like Mulberry [Girls School], just wonderful things the kids are doing in high achievement, … [such as] going on to Oxford. In all the fields of science and arts. The cultural stuff is [also] emerging and people are writing things and film makers and all sorts of things. And in terms of employment, no longer are they working in the sweatshops on the edge of the rag trade. A very significant number of people [are] in all sorts of work, which was just not happening at all in those days.

I am not saying that everything is wonderful. It is just a totally different world. [The] extreme Right-wing organisation hasn't gone away - it's still there in occasional blob of activity. Racist attacks haven't stopped - the pattern has changed. Every now and then some horrific incident happens. It didn't just end.

Abdus Shukur
The new generation of Bangladeshis is [composed of] a very wide mix … You got those kids that have come out with very little education [and] you got those kids that have come out with high levels of education. … Some of them are rough and ready streetwise, ready to argue and fight with anybody, others are very intelligent and very articulate. You will get that … with any migrant society that moves into an area, whether they are here or other parts of the world. … Whether it's the Bengali community or the Hispanics or any other community that have migrated, you will see a level of that transition happening. And I think what we have to realise: "Home is here." Home is not Bangladesh, home is here in the UK. My children see Bangladesh as the home of their grandparents, not even as the home of their parents. They are not ever likely to go back, apart from on holiday. They see it here so we got to see it here as well. We got to make sure that those elements are improved for them and their children. The only way we are going to do that is, a) through education b) through training, to make sure that those that haven't been able to achieve have that level of training and c) looking at a wide range of ways to ensure that people integrate into a society and become good citizens.

Mohammed Abdus Salam
If our parents had been educated in terms of providing information or engaged in how school runs, … then probably our parents would have been able to understand the school curriculum. Now the second generations are able to go to school, talk to the school teachers, find out what was happening, [but] still there is a gap. … The teachers do not always prepare the class in terms of abilities, they do not differentiate. They put … mentally able children [in] with low calibre students. There might be a debate with this issue but I don't want to take the risk. I don't want experiments done on my kids.

This is one of the reasons - the teacher has low expectations of our kids. … I was a governing body member [so] I know how the school system runs. So still our parents are not prepared fully so our kids fail from the beginning, fail from primary. When they go to secondary school they are [in a] different environment. Some people can cope, some people can't cope. If a kid fails from primary school in Year Six, he will not be able to cope in Year Seven. He will be subject to … additional support in home and in school. How many of the parents will be able to fight for the children's special needs? We don't know about the special need. There is nothing wrong with the special needs statement - the local education has the responsibility to provide adequate facilities for all children. So we don't know, we don't know anything about the special need provision. So the kids are failing from the Year Six. … Some people who fail from the fourth year and fifth year, they are on the street.

What I am saying, when we do a business, we have to invest our money first. We have to have our own aims and at the end we will have some profit. … Even the Blair government is talking [about] investing money on education but it's not enough….. [But] we should not blame the … local government only. We must take some responsibilities ourselves as parents. As parents you have some duty and responsibility to spend some time with your own children … We need to build bridges with our own kids. We need to listen to our kids. … It is a partnership. Without that partnership, there will not be an education for the kids. … I must say, gradually our young people are doing better, but it's not enough.

22. Women's Participation

Shila Thakor and Mithu Ghosh

Shila Thakor

[We set up Jagonari because] there was not anything around at the time that was particularly for women in terms of self-development or support. … There were huge organisations that tended to be for men. … [A] few of us got involved and it wasn't easy for us. … [For] lots of other women [it] wasn't suitable. So what we wanted to set up was something that involved child care with training. … And that [is] something that we knew back in the early '80s, and now the government agenda is very much about child care. So that was something that we recognised. So we set up a central place where there could be lots of different kinds of training and places as meeting places. Somewhere [where] you could go, because even [something] like Montefiore was very male-dominated. … The canteen in the Montefiore - you didn't feel like it was somewhere for you to go. We wanted to have [a] big open place ... [for a] café, … kitchens [and] all the different kinds of trainings that we thought people wanted. …

Then we realised that one place is not enough, because Tower Hamlets is big and people don't [go to places] … too far [away]. … We were thinking about one place and having satellites. … That was our original plan. So really it was because that there … wasn't anything that was accessible … [for] young women [and] older women. We saw an information centre, a training centre, child care, food …

Mithu Gosh

[At that time], there was Bangladesh Youth Movement, Bangladesh Youth League, Federation of Bangladeshi Youth Organisation. … They were male-dominated [but] they had some women. So in their agenda it was for everyone. The other thing that was happening at the same time was [that] there was a lot … [for] Bengali women [from] the White female councillors, … because it looked good on their credentials, and especially for the GLC councillors, to be seen … doing something for women. … As far as the male organisations were concerned, our involvement was mainly to write reports for them and things like that. We weren't the mouthpiece at that time. We became that later on but at that time we were getting involved just to become involved. … We [wanted to] have one room in the … [Montefiore] that would have been … just [for] the women's group. Then the GLC was on its way out and especially because of this political interest, they were giving out at that time. There was an empty plot … and we bid for that thing. … We did and they gave us a grant … to actually do the building, which is the Jagonari Centre now.

Shila Thakor

We were all involved in different things. I used to do youth work, so I used to run the girls club in Wapping, and that was a part-time weekend thing on Sunday evenings. So I had that connection, Mithu had her students … mostly Bangladeshis and Somalis. … So we all had our separate work places.

Mithu Ghosh

We actually did a lot of activity before Jagonari came up. We did … two films. There was [one] about the Bengali male youth and there was one about women in Tower Hamlets. … Channel 4 … commissioned that and we researched it and we got [a] lot of the women we knew involved in that and there was a local film-maker who actually made the film. … I was [also] involved in anti-racist campaigns … [and] anti-racist training from my work. We were putting all that together, so before the building, we were actually doing quite a lot of work. If there was a rally and there used to be massive rallies in those days, we used to go and speak at them. We were representing women. I, in particular, had to be careful because I worked for the Council. Later on it became more difficult. When the Liberals came in as well, I had to be a little bit careful not to be too political.

Before the building was built, we got a woman architect who worked with us. We helped them [planning] the building. We told them basically what [it]… should be and what we wanted within the building, even … the façade of the building and the kind of bricks we wanted. And we spent one day travelling all around London to show them the types of brick and the ideas. We looked on books of old traditional buildings there from Bangladesh and India. Pillars and columns and … colours. … [The] original building was a lot bigger and more costly. …

[The name Jaganari was selected because] there were a lot of other things like Bangladesh Youth Movement. We didn't want something like … 'Women's Centre'. … We wanted something different. … It was from *Nazrul*'s poem 'Jagonari'. When we were actually doing the film, one of the things was a voice … of [a] woman reading the poem and it was so beautiful and we thought it good … because it was what we were trying to do. …

Shila Thakor

… [The] older Bengali woman who used to join us sometimes, she actually [sang it] in a meeting … and when she sang it, for us we thought it was the right meaning [for] what we were trying to do. A lot of people who were involved in it agreed. … It must have stood the test of time. Because if you feel so much … the first thing they would have done [is that they] would have changed it. So, no matter what was the criticism, it must have meant something. …

We were lucky we had the Davenant Centre, because the … centre was connecting of men and we joined in with them. … We had to have the support of very strong people.

Mithu Ghosh

We also did have the support of the Bengali youth groups. There wasn't anybody at that time who was particularly hostile … from the youth groups. They were very, very supportive. They still had some criticism and suspicion [but] it was more teasing than really anything serious. … The mosque was built after Jagonari. … [and] there was some criticism, probably started off by somebody who didn't like Jagonari. They were saying: "You are taking our young women, you are teaching them disco dance and all these kind of things." We were thinking of responding or just to ignore it. We decided to ignore it and it went away. If we had responded then, it would have created more criticism. On the whole, there was quite a lot of support. … We had the support of a lot of strong people in the community.

One thing we found was a difficulty between English feminism and what Bengali women really needed. English [feminists believed that] they should be emancipated. You shouldn't allow your husband to treat you like this. It's always lecturing. You should do this, you should do that. Whereas a lot of the time we found ourselves actually arguing against other women. … That might be what feminism is in general but you have to moderate it when you are talking about Asian women in particular. You can't just go, barge in and say: "You should do this, you should do that." Because all [that] will alienate people so we have to actually be careful about what was said in our name because, of course, there were quite a few White radical women. … They [would have] made Jagonari seem to be too radical, so we actually had to make sure that the balance was there.

Shila Thakor

Women at that time were very traditional. … We didn't know everybody and they started to come out. There were lots of young people who were doing their O Levels and A Levels, doing some higher qualifications and they were the ones who tended to get involved first. Because of the day care and because we set up a nursery, people who worked or women who worked needed the day care. We had full day care so it was suitable for people who [were working]. … They were the ones who tended to get involved, because they were using the centre. The other thing is when we set up training, they got involved through that. We had contact with the colleges … [and] put on courses, especially for Asian women. Then we would provide the day care for their courses. If they are not in the building, they might be training somewhere else.

Mithu Ghosh

… All of us were involved in other groups. ... They also had women. … [There was] another group called Asha, and that was mainly for young women. So we were able to [go] … into those [groups] and tell them about Jagonari. … It didn't need much telling because there was the building growing up and there was a lot of interest in it anyway.

Shila Thakor

We could mobilise people from different areas because I was in education and training. … [I was a] teacher and I did this course that was for Bangladeshi students. … So I had all my contacts there. And going [into] schools, you meet people, getting involved in the Bangladeshi education in Tower Hamlets. That was a big campaigning group to get call of our people into schools and also the wives of all the men.

Mithu Ghosh

… There were all these Bangladeshi youth groups around so we tapped into them, saying if you are so interested and supportive, then bring your wife. Most of them did and lots of their wives joined Jagonari and … became employed by Jagonari.

Shila Thakor

[I left Jagonari because] there were quite a lot of people involved in it with a lot of interests. There were people who were interested for being in the managing committee. … Actually the four of us have been doing this for a long time and maybe we were a bit quiet … and other people had different [ideas] … about how they wanted [the] direction of the organisation to [go]. … They were mostly Bangladeshis. We are all busy in our work lives and busy managing and doing it, so we didn't really see what was going on behind the scenes. There was a mobilisation of "Vote for me and not for them" going on using their own strategies and techniques, when people wanted to take over. There was an annual general meeting. We got a shock that day.

Mithu Ghosh
[The shock] was just [that] other people wanted to be the chair and the secretary. … There were quite a lot of women, and some of them were [wondering] what was going on and why they were there - they were just told to come and vote. So we didn't use them, we didn't want an argument or fight or anything. …
I left Tower Hamlets after that and returned [to] Tower Hamlets after 15 years [during] the last year. So we just got out. So then there was a new committee, they were ousted next and this has been the history of that. …
Shila Thakor
I [thought] it was the time for me to really get serious about my teaching. I spent so much time on this project but we all need to move on. [It] wasn't nice [at that] time but it happened and so we just left. ...
It's quite interesting for me to watch from the outside. Quite a few times we were requested to go back and sort it out. And we just said: "No, thank you". … But it [has] settled down a bit now, and there are things going on now. There was no day care for a long, long time. They couldn't get together to do that and the building was empty. [It] wasn't much going on. But they [have] got some good management there now. …
It's wider [now]. Before it was Bangladeshi. Now, you got a significant number of Somalis here and we have got Eastern European families coming on now. …
To be honest, I think a lot … [is] the same, because in the '70s and '80s, it was isolation and loneliness, not having so much talks. You are going through your pregnancy and then going through raising your children without having support. Surprisingly we have many people still feeling like that. … Isolation is still the number one. Things that come on later on … [are] professional support or outside intervention. … Somebody [who] may have grown up in this country and then going to have children … and also the next generation [who is] getting married now and the wives coming from abroad, … they have the sense of isolation.
Mithu Ghosh
… If you look at [the younger ones] … they are far more sharp, in fact too sharp. They are now copying the Black tradition, talking that way and yet every other word is a swear word. … I think they are able to stand up much more for themselves, which again is causing a lot of conflict with their parents as well.

Aloke Biswas
… I was Asian, I was Asian in the sense that … I was brought up in India and the struggle against racism was new to me. … [When] people say Bengali and *Bihari* - this [is] provincialism, this [is] not racism. Racism is unique in the sense that it has got its roots in the capitalist system and imperialism and slavery and so on. I had to learn the whole structure of racism and how it manifests itself and how it uses workers to benefit the capitalist system.

But at the same time the struggle of the women was new to me, because I was brought up in a community which is male-dominated and I had to learn this in my own lifetime, how to overcome the sexism that I had inside me. … I have seen my mother and my sister, the role they played. So here is a circumstance during that time when the people were beginning to bring their families, the women from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan and so on. The women's role [at] that time was seen as the traditional British women's role. … [It] wasn't very long time ago, [in the] beginning of the 20th century. Before that, the women were not [even] fit enough to vote. I am talking about the British women. … *Amrit Wilson* wrote that book in the '70s 'Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain', and that was a pioneer book. She brought in some of the elements and gave tremendous encouragement to the Asian women to come forward.

The women's struggle was taking place in the mid-1970s. … In some of the political parties the women cadre came out and they made contact with the community who was very protective. The Robert Montefiore Centre played this part. It was very interesting, that was a place where the women could come and talk to each other. And there were workers who [gave] them [the] whole range of health and safety information, information on education was there. The young Bengali girls, they were coming forward, they want to go to school and colleges … whether the society will accept it or not. But definitely what you see today, the young Bengali girls [are] coming forward and they are going all over every single part of life and expressing themselves. … There were struggles. As hard as it was in the '70s … it began to flourish in the '80s and '90s.

Derek Cox
The time you are talking about there weren't many women. Jalal's wife was a barrister and she was very active. Pola [Uddin] was … pretty active but she had a lot of trouble with the men. In those days, the traditions of the community, they didn't love to see women in some of the activities. This also included some of the young youth workers as well. … There was Anwara Haque, Nurul's wife. ... She ran the East End Community School. … Clare [Murphy] was very active, too. Caroline [Adams] was probably the most active - she was very well known. ...
Most of the families [in the 1970s] were quite traditional. ... For example, [a friend was] married ... and we were doing a film ... but her husband said she could go but her mother-in-law wouldn't let her go at all. … These sorts of things were quite prevalent in those days. …

Caroline Adams was a success. … Sometimes when you do an appointment there [is] a local candidate who wants the job and this was a Pakistani guy. … When we got [to] the interview in, we saw this young woman who has done [work] in Nepal and all around and [was] running an … education centre in South London. We interviewed her and took an instant like to her. This was just a kind of person we wanted for this job. The other thing - my leadership style … was always not agreed by everybody. But I believed [that] if you get someone like Caroline, you don't tell [her] what to do. You let Caroline do things and tell you what she is doing. …

She got very involved in the community and people still remember her. John [Newbigin] is still remembered by the people and also Clare [Murphy] is still remembered. People still talk well of them. [Caroline] also came under Peter East's spell … They did an awful lot together and she did a lot of things behind the scenes … She decided to move on from Avenues Unlimited [and] … started up an employment project run by Tower Hamlets and then she became an youth officer. I didn't see so much of her in the later part of her life but we all got together when she was dying. We met her … just a few weeks before she died.

John Newbigin
For the boys, the big difference was the clothing trade and the restaurant trade. There were two ways of earning a living, both of which were pretty constant and people could always get work in a factory or in a restaurant. That is no longer the case. I think, one of the interesting things is, whereas in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was almost exclusively the young men who were making the running in the community. Girls and young women were very effectively excluded from real public participations.

Now I get the sense that the young [women] … are pushing the boundaries, getting the jobs, establishing very clear profiles for them, and it's more the young men who are looking around for some kind of … identity and getting in … trouble or having real difficulty with finding a place for themselves in the society, whether it's in the jobs market or positioning himself or herself culturally as a part of the integrated community or [emphasising] … their separateness. Because they are running around in a gang or spending all the time in the mosque or whatever, … it seems to me that it is the young men who have much more difficult issues to address now than the young women. … That's my personal perception.

23. Community Organisation and Political Representation

Nooruddin Ahmed
There were basically two types of restaurants at that time - one obviously were [those providing] for the mainstream or host community and the others were small restaurants for Bangladeshis. … In terms of numbers, the restaurants providing for Bangladeshi community [were] very small and they would be mainly based in and around Brick Lane. … and … around the Commercial Road and Cannon Street Road. ... On this side of [Brick Lane] I think only four restaurants were there. These were the Nazrul, Alauddin, Sonar Bangla and the Nirala … [and they provided mainly for Bangladeshi male. So menus at that time were very limited - it was nothing like today. Some of the restaurants wouldn't have any printed menus anyway. You go there and ask them what was on that day. They will tell and give you the list of curries and vegetables and *dal* available. Some of the restaurants, like especially the 'Sonar Bangla', would give you *dal* free anyway. And [local Bangladeshi worker used to routinely] use those restaurants people. … Like in the morning, before they go to work, they would take some take-away breakfast. Then [they would] come [for] their lunch [and] in the evening [return] to have their meal. But on the weekend, people would be there for hours doing *adda*. … Before '78, especially in '71, people started to use those place as a means of getting news, as a means of organising themselves.

In '71 we had seen demonstrations huge in [their] scale. Bangladeshis never before or after organised such large scale demonstrations … And those restaurants used to be main centres of organising or receiving people, because people at that time were concerned not only about Bangladesh but their families back in Bangladesh. And the only way to receive information was through there. And at that time people did not have radio and television. So people would come there to get the recent information and listen to radio and watch the television. At that time the literacy rate was very low among the Bangladeshi community. So people couldn't read, so they had to come there and talk to someone who has read the newspaper and give the news. One interesting thing was at that time you would find lots of Bangladeshi men, [who were not only unable to read] English [but] could not read a word of Bengali. Yet everyday, especially Sundays, they would buy all the Sunday newspapers, go to someone who can read English and give them and say: "Look, here are the newspapers, tell me what's in it." …

People drew inspiration from the *bidrohi Kabi* or rebel poet Nazrul, but before we go into it let us look [at] … the '78 movement [when] people started to organise \themselves, form various organisations and started to identify their various needs. One of the things people used to do quite commonly was to organise various festivals like Eid, Independence Day, Victory Day etc. … Then people realised [that] in terms of organising events we always had to rely on hiring halls and other things - we didn't have facilities for ourselves. … So people started to articulate themselves, put pressure on the local authority and the relevant bodies. [At] some point they got the go-ahead to have a centre of their own.

When it came [to] naming the centre, there [were] obviously a whole lot of possibilities. The centre was the result of struggle over a number of years by the Bangladeshi community and Kabi Nazrul had represented [struggle] back home, as he was a poet of people. He was himself a very ordinary man and he always fought for the ordinary people. He was imprisoned for speaking for ordinary people so people drew inspiration from him. Some of the poems … can relate themselves with the struggle back in the subcontinent during Indian liberation and struggles here in Britain. Not only in terms of independence. Here people were not expecting to [live in] an independent state of their own but [to gain] economic emancipation. And if you look at Nazrul's poems or writings, it was about ordinary men and women, about emancipation, getting better education, better housing, [but] most importantly being recognised as a decent human being. Look at his 'Coolie', 'Mazur' and 'Samyabadi'.

That's what people thought - what are we doing here? We are fighting against social inequalities … and here is the man [who] long before us has articulated this need and therefore the rightful name for a centre for the community [should] be the Kabi Nazrul Centre. And it was. It used to be a very focal point of the Bangladeshi community [and] the community felt that we have achieved something. Here is the centre right in the heart of the community. … Obviously it is totally different now. Now it is catering for the work of Nazrul or more into arts and culture, whereas at that time it was more like a community centre.

Akikur Rahman

It is leading into somewhere unexpected. People will say we need a Bangladeshi MP and I will say we need two. That's where we are going to. We are going to get two instead of getting one, because I think, as Bangladeshis, we are very … politically conscious. … Because when you are in politics, you do things for other people as well. … Now we have about 30 councillors. *Inshallah*, two MPs for us will not be a huge task … We need [the] right representatives, because we are not only Bangladeshis. In this area there were two Jewish MPs once, but how many Jews were living here? As long you can represent the people, as long the people can see you are capable [of doing] that, the community [will respond].

Rajonuddin Jalal

Toc H is a youth hostel [at Number 7, Tower Hill] that was run by Peter East, [who] is not with us any longer. He died two or three years ago. Many of the young people who used to live there - people who were not doing well in terms of getting jobs in the right track - these are people who would be regarded as disaffected [but they] had a bigger vision of life. They were people who thought that there must be more to life than just working in the rag trade. So the people who were staying in that hostel had their links with the community activists. … Through this involvement people, who lived in Number 7, were getting involved in wider community affairs. So that was like a community resource centre, which was encouraging the young people [to] get involved in the anti-racist struggle.

The police were not very responsive to the needs of the Bengali community. If anything happened they took the side of the White skinheads or the racists. The force has changed significantly … but back in 1978 it was not very sensitive to our needs and [did not] protect us as a community. The local authority's … housing policies were very definitely racist. You did not have ethnic monitoring then. Now it's a common practice. Back in 1978 often housing accommodation would be allocated on the [recommendation] of certain White individuals, who were prominent in the tenants associations. Many of the councillors didn't have an exposure to anti-racism or any involvement with the Bangladeshi community. Many of them … would have been racist as well. …

Council policies have changed significantly. Racist attacks are not so rampant, although they do happen occasionally. I think the community is firmly established at the moment, and in a way we have created our own problems. Now we have our own gangsters and gangs, we have problems with drug abuse and everything else that happens in a community. There have been some political achievements, in that you would see quite a few Bengali councillors in the Town Hall [but] … I think the Bengali community should have done better.

I think Tower Hamlets is the right platform for us to produce Members of Parliament, members of the Greater London Authority and, of course, one or two MEPs as well. We have not succeeded … because the authorities are not interested in letting the Bengalis succeed. They were happy to import other people to suppress the rightful demands of the Bengali community. But the battle goes on and I am sure we will win. Our achievement has been delayed by a few years, but I am sure there will be Bengali representation in the House of Commons, in the European Parliament and in other arenas as well.

[The Bangladeshi parties] have an adverse influence because a large number of people, many of whom are students from Bangladesh who came to this country, continue to have their … affiliations with political parties back in Bangladesh. As a consequence, they are not [taking] part in the political process of this country. As far as I am concerned, having loyalty to a political party in Bangladesh is not a problem but [if] you spend 90 per cent of your active political time with a political party in Bangladesh, that's counter-productive for us in this country.

I think [that] at the end of the day I am not going to go back to Bangladesh. My children are definitely not going back to Bangladesh, and so they have to get involved in this country, and the politics here. Unfortunately, the large number of people involved in the political parties in Bangladesh is not helping that course. If you go to a public meeting convened by either the Awami League or BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) or even *Jamaat-e-Islami* you will find that thousands of people attend. … At the same time if one of the local political parties here convenes a meeting you would find only a handful of people or at the most maybe hundreds of people attending. So in the long run, the people, who are too much involved in the Bangladesh political parties, need to withdraw, because at the end of the day we are going to stay here. We need to get involved here in this country.

Jamal Hasan
Lutfur Rahman Shajahan and Peter East, both of whom have passed away, started this important project based at the Minories, behind Tower Hill Underground Station. In those days the immigrants could bring their children to the UK without their mothers. It was very common in those days to see Bangladeshi families with young people and without a mother.

There were no provisions for these youths at all. Lutfur Rahman Shajahan and Peter East knew each other from a youth club, called Crypt, near Aldgate. Lutfur Rahman Shahajan was a barrister and also a teacher at the local Myrdle Sreet School and Peter East was the warden of a youth hostel run by the TOC H for white young people Lutfur Rahman discussed with Peter East about a hostel just for the Bangladeshis and the possibility of the TOC H funding such a project. Peter East thought that it was a good idea and he approached TOC H with the idea of a hostel for the Bangladeshi youths. It was established and became known to everybody in the East End, not as TOC H but as 'No. 7'

No. 7 played a very important role as it allowed the youngsters to take the big step of leaving their parents' house in the East End and live an independent life. Most of these youths had educational backgrounds and wanted to study at University. There were 24 to 30 of them, which was quite a lot.

I have to say, looking back, most of these youths were enlightened and they were free and independent and could do whatever they liked. Caroline Adman and John Newbigin two youth workers from 'Avenues Unlimited' joined Peter East and Lutfur Rahman and created a unique project with multi-purposes for the young Bangladeshi youths. It wasn't a place just to stay and sleep at night. Initially young people were not coming forward to leave their parents and to live in a hostel. Lutfur Rahman had insisted that I lived there as a resident which would encourage others to move in. I was the second person to move in. I was a bachelor at the time and was living in Bangladesh Bhaban in Highbury Hill. I agreed to live in the East End, which turned out to be both very exciting and challenging.

We had a huge common room in the hostel with facilities for various games and a TV. We used to go to 4 or 5 camping trips every year. The residents of No7 were slightly better off than others in many ways and they had more confidence in the things we used to do.

I particularly remember one camping trip, somewhere near Lake District**.** Before our visit, we were told that many of the local people had the impression that black and Asian people were bad. But our hospitality during the camping trip changed their views about us and the local people fell in love with the youths. Being acquainted with us for a short period the local youths became so friendly with us that when we left they became emotional and everyone was in tears. It was a memorable day for all of us at No 7. The strange thing was that National Front had won a council election seat there. I forget the name of the camping place, it was a racist place, but still we could win the hearts of the local people.

Suroth Ahmed (Faruk)
[Peter East] wanted to do something in Bangladesh. On 24th December 1977, 11 Bengalis, who lived in the hostel, and Peter East went to Bangladesh. ... At the beginning of '78 he wanted us to get some children, who [were] poor. He wanted to help them financially, to become educated. Peter East asked me to get some poor children for the project. At first I was convinced that I could do this job but when I tried to enlist the children, I faced lots of problems. We selected a school near Sylhet Town; it was an area with lots of rickshaw pullers and their families. When we went to the school, the school authority didn't receive us warmly. They were suspicious about our motives. ... When we went to the secretary of the school, he could not give us time as he was very busy. The next time we met him at a meeting, he also did not help us help the poor children.

I have tried to help the Bengali community in so many ways. I have taken video players to those who did not have one. During Christmas I took the children to parties to let them see and learn about the English people. The parents were suspicious and sometimes they were not even opening doors. Many even [said]: "The young boys living in the hostel are abandoning our religious faith and becoming Christians" and Peter East was accused of motivating us. 'Time' magazine reported on this issue in 1972.

John Eversley
Very soon after I came to the East End in 1977, there was a by-election in Spitalfields. The existing councillor had been living in America for a couple of years. He was replaced by a man who was a local teacher at that time, but he was a White middle class man who had no connection to the Bangladeshi community at that time. There was no question of them selecting a Bangladeshi candidate and the other two Labour councillors were not very sensitive at all to the Bangladeshi community and I thought [that] this was really peculiar. They were not considering a Bangladeshi candidate given the profile and the population of the area.

I remember the night of the election. The Leader of the Council, who was Paul Beasley at that time and Chief Executive, … came to a party at Toynbee Hall and they were discussing openly that 'their man' will win and I thought it was really peculiar - the Chief Executive talking about their candidate [as] 'our man'. … What I felt was, this was a gathering of the good and the great locally [but] hardly any Bangladeshis were there and those who were there were the people from the Bangladesh Youth League. There were two [also] refugee doctors from Bangladesh - people who came here as political exiles. They were professionals, and [the third was] also a guy called Ashraful Islam, who was the son of the murdered Vice-President of Bangladesh … They were nice guys, who I worked with over a long period, but they weren't very representative of the youth.

It felt to me that the kinds of things the Council was doing for the Bangladesh community were not being done with the community and they were pretty limited and [the councillors] were a bit suspicious of getting involved with the clothing industry, because they felt that they were all sweat shops [with] very poor working conditions. They weren't unionised and they were not the backbone of the labour movement and they saw them as undercutting unionised labour and so on. On housing the GLC (Greater London Council) was the [main] landlord rather than the borough council and the GLC's record was pretty poor. … [There were also] the GLC and ILEA (Inner London Education Authority) Councillors … and they were definitely part of the problem. …

[In 1978] the CRE basically [also did not have] a clue … The Bangladeshi Commissioner at the CRE at that time was a Bangladeshi woman. She had very little connection with the area. There were a few Bangladeshi staff working at the CRE [but] on the whole they weren't very involved in Tower Hamlets. … [The CRE] represented Caribbean people more effectively then it did the Bangladeshi people. So one of the many shifts in power that happened during 1978 was the attempt to open up the [CRE's local body], change its name and all kinds of stuff to [make it a] more inclusive organisation. It didn't [really] have a local presence and didn't know what was going on locally, and it produced this report, 'Brick Lane and Beyond' [which] was full of factual errors and … political misconceptions [but] it had a great unifying affect on local organisations that everybody thought it was mistaken. …

As a result of [this response] Ken [Livingstone, the Leader of the GLC] made a response to it and the CRE was persuaded to write a second report. They commissioned a sort of freelance researcher - an Irish guy called Patrick and when Patrick appeared, people were a bit suspicious. They thought why the White Irish guy was appointed who doesn't know East End and did not look like he was a serious researcher. [He was a] White guy with raspberry permed hair style and John Lennon glasses and fashionably dressed. … In fact he was great. He listened to people and he got people talking to each other. He was very good at getting people think about practicalities. He focused on unemployment and on the voluntary training of youth in the Bangladeshi community.

He came up with some practical things that could be done. One strand was the importance of welfare rights advice to young people in particular, another strand was the access to training opportunities and the third strand was increasing the skills of people working in the clothing industry, on the grounds that's where most people were employed. One reason why the conditions were very poor was that they didn't have the higher skill jobs in the industry. [With better skills] they would share more of the profits of clothing industry and produce higher value garments as a result they will get more money.

So he produced this report and the CRE and other bodies had relatively no choice but to fund its recommendations. … I was heavily involved … because quite by chance the previous autumn we set up the Tower Hamlets Training Forum, which was designed to try to improve the government training schemes that had been set up, which we were very critical of, and to try to do something about jobs in general. It didn't have particularly a Bangladeshi angle to it. It was partly to do with the closure of the docks in 1976 and very little have been done to replace jobs that had gone there. A little bit to do with the clothing industry and it was to do with whether the kind of people who were unemployed would get the kind of jobs that were being created, which were service jobs and public sector jobs.

So we had this organisation which was very new, and Patrick came along and said: "We think the Training Forum should be the vehicle for money to come into this area, because it is broadly based. It includes the Trade Unions; it includes the Council, supporters and the education bodies". I was the treasurer of the Training Forum, so I ended up doing the funding applications. We got money from the CRE, we got money from Europe, we got some money from the Council and the GLC, and certainly we had a massive training project on our hands.

I also got involved in the welfare right project. … JohnNewbigin was supposed to be running it but somehow he ended up as being the treasurer or the secretary with Dan Jones as the chair. All these organisations were White-led in the 1970s … and some of that was because the statutory bodies were simply unwilling to hand over money to Bangladeshi organisations. These organisations were half-way houses - the officers were often White but the majority of the members of the committee were Bangladeshis and so decision-making was certainly controlled to a great extent by the Bangladeshi community. But the managerial control was very often in the hands of the people like me.

Syeda Rowshanara Choudhury Shelly
My husband was a community worker, and we had people coming to our homes every now and then. And our family is large and my family members used to come regularly. I also [had to take] taking my children to school. Once in a week the Mia sahib used to come and once my language tutor used to come and one day in a week the tutor for my children used to come. …

My husband was awfully busy with his community work. I was all alone when one of my children was born. My husband was so busy that, if I or any of my children was sick, he had no time [to look after] us. He was not even concerned if my children were ill - he didn't even remember to ask [about] their latest condition. I was sometimes angry but after some time I left him alone.

24. Relationship with White People

Jamal Hasan
When I came to this country in 1972, I realised that Asians, black people and anybody who came from a colonial background were still perceived as subservient to the whites. It seemed to be generally thought that white people were superior and we were inferior. As a result of that feeling, there was little or no interaction between white people and Asian people.

Not only was racism very apparent, but institutional racism was very deep rooted. Not long before the '70s, people with foreign names had had to change their names in order to get a job. That sort of racism was felt by black ethnic minority people and I was told that the first turning point for this community was in 1962, when there was a race riot in Notting Hill Gate. Following the riot, white people started to accept the black community in this country, before that, it seemed they did not even comprehend the existence of black people.

Despite this, the Asians, because of their cultural and religious differences and language problems, were badly treated by society. Indians, Bangladeshis and the Pakistanis were all known to and described by many whites as 'Pakis'. Racists could get away with attacking 'Pakis', who were seen as 'easy targets' because there was no resistance from the Asians when they were attacked. If a white racist slapped an Asian, it was as though they would give another cheek for them to slap again.
This was the attitude maintained by the older generation. The younger generation was not prepared to stand idly by, turning the other cheek. The first incidence of the youth revolting against their elder generation was in 1976 when the Asian youths in Southall, took charge. That was a turning point for Asians in the whole country.

It took over two years for the Asian youths in East London to oppose to the older generation and to resist the racial attacks perpetrated by the white racists. At that time, racist attacks by the National Front were a daily occurrence in East London. The local National Front members used to be joined by NF members and supporters from Dagenham and other surrounding areas. They had their pitch on the junction of Bethnal Green Road and Brick Lane. This is where every Sunday, they used to sell their literature and perpetuate their propaganda, recruiting new members. Every now and then, they would come out in groups or even alone with the intention of beating up Asian families or Asian individuals or to vandalise Asian shops in Brick lane.

Because we were still subservient and the older generation particularly used to placate the youths, we could not do anything but suffer. The police would hardly take any action or do anything to stop such racial attacks. After the 1976 riot in Southall, the wave came to East London; slowly and gradually. The youths thought, they could not rely on the older people to defend them, and if they kept on relying on them they would continue to be beaten up by the racists.

Nooruddin Ahmed
The White people feel that Bangladeshis have been benefited with the changes since 1980. … I find this is totally unjustified, because morally or legally, ignorance is not a self defence. You cannot be a racist or have prejudices and say that: "Oh, I did this because I don't know." Ignorance is not a self-defence. Therefore, what did happen here, that one of the worse affected areas in the country during the Second World War was East London. So East London was very badly damaged, not only physically [but] in terms of economic infrastructure and everything. And then the politicians came here to raise the morale of local population. They said: "Look, after the war, we will do lots of things for you." And some of it was delivered and the other was not delivered.

So therefore the White community felt a sense of betrayal. Then the Bangladeshi community came and started to get some benefits. … I can see the White people might have some reason to feel [resentful] … but I don't think that [was] justifiable.

Lots of Bangladeshis will be happy to join the White people to demand for their rights as well and that's what we did. When we … [talk about] social justice inequalities, we are not just talking about Bangladeshis we are talking about people in East London or Tower Hamlets as a whole, for everyone. When I was a councillor, like the other councillors we were talking about people as a whole, so we did not differentiate saying: "You have to do something for the Bangladeshis and not for the Whites." White people might have [anger] but their anger was wrongly placed. Their anger should have been directed to people who were responsible for delivering goods in a sense and they did not. They should have taken Bangladeshis with them, rather than taking their anger against Bangladeshis.

Dan Jones
The ordinary people were a lot of the time standing aside and looking with some alienation from what's going on, keeping a distance. More a kind of apathy rather than [an] active aggressive anti-thing. … The Bengali community there and the older people were cautious and hesitant, I think, in some way.

In terms of race relations, to me it was gradually changing attitudes of positions and things. The demography of the population changed, [there were] very extraordinary changes in those days. Particularly in the '70s there were safe areas, where the Bengali community was rapidly changing in its nature. Still by '76 it was a male [Bengali] community - the boys and uncles and dads and some … cousins. There was a statistic that there were 10 [men] to every one [woman]. It was during that period that the families were coming to join people in very significant numbers. So by the early '80s it was a very different picture. The other thing [that] was beginning to happen was, people were beginning to move out of the little Bengali ghetto area where they feel safer to move into. Lot of these things were reported in that time, about people moving out to new estates from the west focus around Brick Lane and Shadwell as it were, and into new areas, that are now safe, absolutely hundred per cent safe. And that is not to say that in the so-called safe areas [in] that people wanted to live, there wasn't violence. There were terrible things even in the safe areas - brutal harassment, petrol bombs and God knows what.

The younger generation is growing up in a multi-racial community. To some extent you got the weird things of education, you have Catholic schools. Catholic schools are not for Muslims, Church of England's school is for anyone who turns up. But the Catholic schools are White or Black – [for] … West Indian Catholic families, Irish Catholics and then the Catholics who became Catholics. Or … you go to Bengali school. So growing up as kids in separate schools, that's a matter of concern.

Kenneth Leech

It is very important to combat racism wherever it occurs, and race and class are very intertwined, and I [have] always been critical of people who say, and there were a lot of White politicians including a lot of Marxists and members of the Communist Party who all took the view that it [has] all really to do with class - race is irrelevant. I think that's very misleading and wrong. But in the same time … race and class are very much intertwined. We have to look at them together, when I said earlier that I think the real problem [is] class more than race. I was talking particularly about segregation between housing. I think the segregation which is based upon wealth is actually far more worrying. You are going to get wealthy Asian people and wealthy White people, and poor Asian people and poor White people. If we look at America, a lot of the wealthy Black people, in Chicago for example, live around the University of Chicago area [and] never ever cross the 47th Street and never cross [the] 63rd and have nothing … to do with poor Black people.

So I think class still remains as important issue. I thought we have learned some important lessons from both the '70s and the '90s, when the BNP briefly came to power in the Isle of Dogs. One of the things [that] seems to me really important is political demonstrations are necessary. We do need to be careful that we don't simply go on fighting battles with the weapons of yesterday and I often think [of] Sola Lewinsky, the community organiser in Chicago, who said: "You should never tell the power that, what you are going to do. You should never do the same thing twice and you should always act with humour." He did believe a lot of the older people on the Left had only one way of dealing with things - it was by marching and shouting slogans. There may be a time when that's important … [but] who is going to pick up the pieces on Sunday nights when you go home?

And it came to me very vividly on the Isle of Dogs. Just after the election of the BNP councillor, a friend of mine went to interview people about their reactions and one of the people she talked to was a Pakistani shopkeeper. And she asked him what he thought about it all, and he said: "I hear some folk, shouting 'Fascists out', I hear other people shouting 'Pakis out', from where I am standing it sounds very much [the] same to me. I just pull down the shutters." Well, people who were shouting those two different things were on opposite sides and many of them would have been very offended and horrified that to him they sounded the same, from the distance. "Fascists out, "Pakis out" sounds much the same. What it brought home to me is what you think you are meaning, is not necessarily what you heard to be meaning.

And when a lot of members of Anti-Nazi League, whom people of Bethnal Green have never seen before, never set eyes before who they are, they were not local people, … came in Bethnal Green and marched through it on the Sunday … they shouted: "Fascists out, fascists out." What they thought they were doing was bearing witness to the evil of fascism and they were on the other side. Then what a lot of the local people thought they were saying [was]: "You are all a load of fascists, you East End working class people." So what they thought they were doing was not what came over … [to those] who lived there … They didn't help and I think you can't really defeat the racists except by showing that you care about the plight of the people more than they do. And at the end of the day that was what defeated Beackon. And Beackon's vote actually went up in 1994 … [but] the reason … was [that] far more people voted. And so I think, what got to be a bit more subtle than sometimes we are. And there are lots of different ways of fighting racism and sometimes [if] they [are] all … read out simultaneously you are going to lose the battle.

I think the whole position of the White working in relation to racism is pretty complicated. My first experience of East End was a multiracial community. … The first place I lived in when I was 18 was in Cable Street, where my next door neighbour was an Ethiopian woman married to a Somali. And … [they] lived around the back of [a] Nigerian café. On the other side of us was a Maltese family, who ran the Liberal Party of Malta, and it was surrounded by Somalis and Gambians and people from what later became Bangladesh and people from [the] Caribbean. So I assumed the whole East End was like that and when I went to be a priest in Hoxton in 1964 … I really got [a] shock, because in Hoxton you never saw a Black priest and you never saw any Jews. It was entirely White working class and when Oswald Mosley stood as Parliamentary candidate for Shoreditch in 1965, he got a lot of votes, and [a] lot of the people voted even from my congregation. I … became aware of the fact that there is a lot of racism within the White working class. We don't do anybody any favours, least of all ourselves.

On the other hand, in the '70s, there weren't connections between the White working class people and the Bengalis, except in the work places. It was very, very common to hear White working class people say: "I have nothing against the Bengalis, I work with one." And this is a kind of making a distinction between Bengalis or Black people as a whole and my mate. *He* is all right, *he* is a friend of mine but *they* are Blacks. I think where the communities have no comprehension of each other and speak different languages, all kinds of mates and stereotypes will be built up by both sides. And yet the beginning of [a] connection will come from something quite surprising at the end. My next-door neighbour in the late '50s and early '60s was this Ethiopian woman, who spoke with a Yorkshire accent, because she spent some time in Yorkshire, and her husband was Somali. And she founded the first Black woman organisation. By the time she died, she was part of the East End and she still spoke the Yorkshire accent and she was still seen as Black.

And a lot of people were alerted [as to] what racism was all about through friendship with her. So a lot of this depends on people who are able to break down walls and to cross from one place to another place. Tassuduq Ahmed was brilliant at doing this. It is like getting into somebody else's shoes. And he could also subvert things in a very quite way, I remember him going to meet somebody in a club on some occasion, which is a sort of Liberal gentleman's club in the West End and Tassuduq turned up without a jacket and without a tie. And the man he was going to see was a very worthy Liberal with a good reputation in the race relations field. He was very embarrassed and he said: "Tassaduq you [have] forgotten your jacket and tie. I am afraid they won't let you in without a jacket and a tie. But we do have spare jackets and ties for people who have forgotten." And Tassaduq said: "If you don't mind, I didn't forget. I deliberately left them at home. You see, I know this is your power base, this is, where you feel comfortable. You feel safe here. I booked a room at the café across the road and we are going to meet there." And Tassaduq turned the tables on this matter and I think he realised that unless you shift the ground, there can be no conversation, and I think that applies across the border really. But it's a slow process and I think that as long as people are living in different compartments and they are not communicating there is not much hope.

Rajonuddin Jalal
There were a lot of misguided White young people who thought that the Bengalis were taking away jobs from them, Bengalis were taking away homes from them. But that was not the reality. The economic crisis in this country was not created by the presence of the Bengalis and all the Asians or Blacks. It was the industrial decline that has been evident in this are. The working class White people found it easier to blame things on the Asian and the Black communities, but the reality is that they had been let down by the White community. The working White young people who were not achieving well, many of whom were unemployed, were in the situation, because the economic policies were not working in their favour.

So they were scapegoating the Bengalis for their problems, which were not created by the Bengalis. It was created by the economic climate that was prevailing in the country at the time. So in a way the minority of the racist elements, who would not like the presence of the Bengali community, are neither here nor there. You will have a small element in any given community - that's not a big problem as far [as] I am concerned, because they can be defeated in the streets. The anti-racist battle that we fought did involve many anti-racist White people as well. There was a large section of the White community who [was] opposed to the racist thugs. But the skinheads, the young National Front supporters, must have been let down, because at the end of the day they didn't achieve anything by running a campaign of racial hate … against the Bengalis in Tower Hamlets, rather they had had to move out of the area. It was easier for us to deal with the racists in the streets. The main problem was the Establishment. The authorities were not responsive to the needs and aspirations of the Bengali community, which is a different chapter. The battle of 1978 paved the way to us to establish our position as a community and then, later on, [to] fight institutional racism and demand equal rights.

Unfortunately, the remaining number of White working class people is very limited. I think [the relationship] ... is not one of hatred, as it used to be. It's more one of coexistence. Maybe it's because there [are] no other options, but it's not like you are … attacked in your own home because you … [are] a Bengali. … I read such stories about the Bengali young gangsters harassing the pensioners. … I don't like that. Pensioners, whether they are Bengali or White, I don't care but I don't like the fact that I read stories about them being harassed by young Bengalis. This is not acceptable, this is not what we wanted when we fought the battle of Brick Lane back in 1978. We wanted a community where everyone lives peacefully in harmony with each other.
But it's not a big problem, I just happen to mention something that I have read about recently, a few months ago. I think many of the White working class has moved out of the area. They have moved further east to Essex. So I think the climate has changed through Britain. Back in 1978 there was an impetus for the National Front campaign against the Black community. I don't think the same impetus is there at the moment. There are racists here and there. If anything, institutional racism is [the] more worrying phenomenon, but the overt racists on the streets attacking people very simply because they happen to be Bengalis or Black.

Aloke Biswas

We feel [that] the Right-wing White community, unfortunately they are the part of the British working class - the White working class. They were seriously threatened by our existence but it is not right that we are taking up the jobs.

The first wave of the immigration took place soon after the Second World War. The history was [that the] Asian people or the Indian people or the Afro-Caribbean people didn't just feel that they wanted to come to England. They were invited. … Enoch Powell argued in '45-46 that we need the work force from other countries to come and do the jobs and work for sustaining the economy. It was very important and people who came from India, they got jobs … in the steel [industry], in the foundry in the Midlands, but in Tower Hamlets the people mainly came from Bangladesh. There is a history why we have the Bangladeshi people particularly from Sylhet area in Tower Hamlets. Two or three families came and they wrote to their friends and [a] few more came and eventually they began to settle here. They went right into the rag trade, that is the clothing business. So from the beginning, the Asian community has contributed to the economy. So it is not the jobs we are taking over - those are the jobs the White working class will not do. Even today the jobs that quite a lot of Asian people, the students and the young people are doing, White working class will not do. Take the Chinese cockle pickers who died in Morecambe Bay. I [have not] yet … [seen] the English working class or the British working class … picking up cockles and it is the Polish people [who] are doing that now.

It is very important how the anti-racist struggle shaped up during this time. One of the things that we picked up from history [is] … when the Mosley's '*Blackshirts'* tried to march through the Jewish community in Cable Street. It is known as the Battle of Cable Street. The Jewish community was supported by the ordinary White working class. They said they shall not pass. So they stopped the Mosley's 'Blackshirts', the racist element against the Jewish community. They were marching through Cable Street and the people brought … furniture on the street. Their tables, chairs, beds - and they barricaded. The police tried to interfere but they [did] … not move. They barricaded the whole street. They shall not pass. So we had that big strength behind us that White working class should help.

So we went to the Trade Union movement, and said: "We need your help. You got to come and help us." We are defending ourselves and it is the struggle of the workers. We don't want to engage ourselves in terms of Black and White, it is the workers' struggle. We are workers, we are nothing but workers. The miners helped us, they invited us to their meetings and we used to say: "You are the workers, you go down to dig up the coal and you die in the process." There were incidents where coal workers died, and it is all to make money. … "But you are running this country. We came here and we work, and we are dying on the street. We need your help." But it was very much left to the Left-wing groups, and some of the revolutionary Left-wing groups … came on the front line. The International Socialist Group … later transformed into the political party called SWP. I was an active member of the SWP. The SWP took it up very seriously. They said: "It is our Asian brothers and sisters, who are being attacked and we will have to defend them."

In order to make inroads within the trade union movement, Anti-Nazi League (ANL) was set up and I was one of the founder members, with *Chris Harman*, *Lyndsay German* and some of the comrades we had in this area. These were the people who worked day and night to mobilise the Anti-Nazi League, a wider platform for all people who want to fight racism, irrespective of their political colour … and ANL had a tremendous success. I remember one march organised in 1977 in Trafalgar Square. There were 200,000 people marching from Trafalgar Square to Victoria Park in Hackney. [The] top of the march had reached Victoria Park and people still haven't left Trafalgar Square. So we are talking about four to five solid miles. And that was seen as a big success in the fighting against racism. …

The National Front … made their headquarters in Hoxton near Shoreditch. So they picked up the area just to play on the fear and feed the White working class with the fear that they are taking our jobs and housing and so on. So we had a serious problem on our doorstep. The National Front was organising but we took it up very strongly. We fought them back. They would march and we will go and try to stop the march and so on. So the Anti-Nazi League was a major force. The International Marxist Group (IMG) transformed themselves into Social Unity [and] Tariq Ali was the leader. The Revolutionary Communist Group, Revolutionary Communist Tendency, Revolutionary Communist Party were the parties. And people who came with us and [the] whole range of other groups like militant groups from [the] Labour Party, NALGO (National Association of Local Government Officers), supported us and we were the active member of the NALGO Action Group. So it was seen [that] the Anti Nazi League [was] able to create a platform and that was the very important aspect. And [they] stood by us and we felt very happy and their role should never be underestimated in our history.

John Newbigin
For the boys the big difference was the clothing trade and the restaurant trade. There were two ways of earning a living, both of which were pretty constant and people could always get work in a factory or in a restaurant. That is no longer the case. I think one of the interesting things is [that] in the late 1970s and early 1980s it was almost exclusively the young men, who were making the running in the community. Girls and young women were very effectively excluded from real public participation. Now I get the sense that [it is] the young [women] who are pushing the boundaries, getting the jobs, establishing very clear profiles for them, and it's more the young men who are looking around for some kind of … identity and getting in … trouble or having real difficulty with finding a place for themselves in the society, whether it's in the jobs market or positioning himself or herself culturally as a part of the integrated community or [emphasising] … on their separateness. Because they are running around in a gang or spending all the time in the mosque or whatever. But it seems to me that it is the young men who have much more difficult issues to address now than the young women. … That's my personal perception.

Akikur Rahman
When I first came in this country, I was young. Obviously, I was involved with all the friends I have … here. They were all Bangladeshis. Obviously, I couldn't speak English at that time and I was involved with lots of things, with youth activities at that time since 1967.

When I first came … in 1967, my brothers and I were sent to the Bow Boys School, and … obviously to me it [was] … a new world … [at] that time if I can really remember it. I was in a very alien world. … There was a lot of different cultures, different ways of thinking and it's a different language, and that was the biggest problem we had in that time. So when we go to the school in the morning, you know the children of this area, 99 per cent of them were White children and they were not used to Asians. Obviously, they were not used to … the Asian culture, neither we were used to the White culture, so it is two different things all together. You don't know what exactly the White culture is and they don't know the Asian culture. So when we go to the school, they said: "You smell of curry", because we eat curry, and when they come [we said that] they smell of burger, [because] they eat burger.

25. British Bengali Identity

Rajonuddin Jalal
I am British of Bengali origin, so my cultural identity will always be there. I was born in Borlekha, Sylhet – [those are] my cultural roots [and] that's where my parents and grandparents come from. But I am a Bengali - that's my national identity. But I am British because I grew up here, I live here, I am going to die here. My children were born here so they are the future of Britain.

Akikur Rahman
Mentally I was Bengali, completely Bengali, and [crucial to] my survival [at] that time. Yes, I am proud to be Bengali and I wanted to live as a Bengali. It was a challenge. Because to force me and [take] away my identity, I won't let them have it. Because this is the 'identity' fight. It is racism, completely against my identity. So my fight was [to stay as] a Bengali. I am a British Bengali.

Aloke Biswas
It is very interesting. We work here and we have made it our home. Other people should say for themselves, but a substantial number of Asian [and] Afro-Caribbean people, who have retired, … feel [that] going back home is a big thing. … People, [who] are successful, [have] made a little bit of money and … are getting a pension, they will [return]. But I am not putting that into the agenda of [everyone], because [for the] youngsters this is their home. … My son says: "Dad, don't expect me to go to India and work there and settle down there. If you do, we will support you."

As for me, I could not make this my home, because still I experience racism. … Now we are all Taliban for a better word, we are all terrorists. They don't know what I believe, what I have done. We are all terrorists, all Muslims. … So this country didn't allow me to feel that this is my home, although I own property, I have worked all through my life, and I have got a good pension. … But what I notice, when I go home, which I do every year, that I have became a foreigner in my homeland. So at this moment, there is no such place that I call home. Good or bad, I don't know whether I would die back in India. I am very close to India; I go back there every year. I love living here, within my community and I love people there in India. Perhaps I am a universal person [as] Nazrul said to us.

Syeda Rowshanara Choudhury Shelly
I think I am in Bangladesh now, because we have 3-4 Bengali satellite channels, so we can get all the first-hand news and views of Bangladesh. When we go out, we meet English, Bengalis, Pakistanis and all other people. We don't feel foreigners any more.

Mohammed Abdus Salam
Because we made UK our home, we are part of the country, part of the society. It is our home. I believe myself as second generation. My kids are the third generation. They are here growing up, born and brought up. They will marry and extend their family as well. Then obviously you can't get out. Basically, it's our home. Like people who live in Bangladesh, they would not want to come to the UK for their retirement. They would come to UK for a holiday. … Similarly, we here in Britain, we are part of the community. We are here. This is our home. Back home obviously we will go to see our fatherland, motherland. Of course, we will have to go to Bangladesh, I took my whole entire family to Bangladesh last year. They visited Chittagong, Dhaka and so on. Then we went to India, Kolkata, Delhi and so on. They [would] love to go again, but it's very expensive. So we are here.

[It was] our aim in the '70s … to stay here with some dignity. We have to fight on three levels - socially, politically and physically. We have kept on pressuring the local authorities and ... still we are not able to achieve the complete solution of the housing problem. Education to some extent has been solved but there is a big gap and we have to narrow the gap. And the parents have to become more aware. Otherwise we are in deep trouble.

26. Brick Lane Now

Kenneth Leech

I am very fond of Brick Lane - I regard it as my second home. I am bothered about the commercialisation of Brick Lane. In fact … I think a lot of ordinary people, including ordinary Bengali people, feel very excluded from it. It's very much a tourist place. The concept of Banglatown … is certainly good for business [but] I am not sure whether it is all that good for the people who actually live there. I have done a little survey and I found [that] … a lot of the restaurants are entirely tourist focused. And some years ago there was [a plan for] mobile phone on every table for City workers. So there are aspects … that bother me really the kind of sentimentalising [of] Brick Lane. I was astounded when I was in New York City few years ago to discover a restaurant called 'Brick Lane' in the Lower East Side … I don't think it was Bengali, I have eaten there and it was very good.
There was no explanation as to why they called it Brick Lane. As if you will expect lots of British tourist [to] be wandering round the Lower East Side which is not particularly a tourist area, late at night [and] they just stumble across Brick Lane! The fact that they named it in New York was culturally quite interesting. It coincides with Monica Ali's novel. So a lot of people in United States now know what Brick Lane means, or think of it or have a sense of it. I am worried about the commercialising of it and I am worried about the isolation of that stretch of restaurants from the rest of the East End.

Rajonuddin Jalal

It's a different place. Back in 1978 I think there were at most four or five Bengali shop owners. Now it's about 75 per cent Bengali. We have the curry houses which are doing fairly well but I think they could do better. If they were operating on a professional basis, then they could definitely do better. There is a need for marketing; Brick Lane is a safe place for people to come. At the end of the day, it will provide a lot of the people with employment and that [will] support a large number of families. I hope that the business community of Brick Lane will take note of that and would try improving the quality of food and services they provide and that way they will be able to survive in the market for longer.

I think the saddest thing that has happened in Brick Lane is the fact that we had not been able to acquire the Truman's Brewery site for the community. It has been bought by a private individual and that is a business enterprise, I can't really complain about that but I think we did have an opportunity to acquire that site and had that been acquired by us then that would have given us the true establishment for Banglatown, which we have named the area to be. Without the Truman's Brewery site, it is Banglatown without our freehold ownership.

Aloke Biswas

So the gentrification began to happen when people were conscious and they said: "This is not something that we are prepared to accept, we need the resources, we want to turn Brick Lane into a nice place", which you see Brick Lane today. It is somewhere people are very proud to live and White people don't mind coming and living in Brick Lane, because there is the tremendous kind of community spirit, the transport system is good, the banks' world centre is there. So everything is going for us now. But Brick Lane had to come out of the '70s and that transformation took place all throughout 1970s when the young people of Brick Lane stood up and fought and they fought for the community.

John Eversley

I suppose I am a bit sad in lots of ways, because I feel it [has] lost its connections to the lives of the people who live around Brick Lane. Financially it's very successful. Places that were really run down … have been done up and some people within the Bangladeshi community are enjoying the benefit of it. I am not sure the fruits of that success have been shared out very equally. I don't actually think that there is a great sense of ownership [generally]. Well, there is the mela and festivals or things like that. It [is] great to see lots of young Bangladeshi people and all the Bangladeshi people out on Brick Lane. But it's once a year. It doesn't seem to me the rest of the time that it is the same place that belongs to the local people. It's very much a businessman's street. It's very good that instead of the kind of division where the brewery is, now there are trendy shops [but] it does seem to me that it has lost something.

There is still the housing and there is still people living in poor conditions and it is really good to see how many Bangladeshi people are now going to university. It is great to see people in professional jobs and so on. I know that there are children who I saw in the basement of East End Community School in 1977 and 1978, who are senior civil servants, who are successful entrepreneurs, who are teachers and all of that is great, it is good that those things happened. But it is not physically evident in Brick Lane that those things ever existed and that part of the reason why things changed [was] because of all those community activities that went on.

Clare Murphy

This is just another world, where there are about 44 restaurants. … It must have been in the '90s when the latest transformations started. This may be partly because the Truman's Brewery was no longer a workplace and so, although the property developers were keen to redevelop the site, because property values dived, they couldn't redevelop this site. They found other uses for the site and … still wanted to make big money, so they drew in music studios or God knows what. That had a snowball effect, so that you have now got the Brick Lane of today, where … it's the coolest place to be. …

But I do remember, when this new wave was starting, there were sort of parallel universes that people were living in. There were some sort of trendy persons [going] along to the latest internet or cafe bar on Brick Lane and you might have various hajjis going to the mosque. Their world just didn't cross over. I remember one time, asking an elderly Bengali man what he thought of what was going on. And it was like it didn't exist - he almost didn't see it. He has to see it now because it's just so prominent.

Abdus Shukur

Tower Hamlets … in the '70s and '80s was a developers' delight, local people's nightmare and the yuppies' paradise. If you look at what's happening in the area, automatically with gentrification you do get displacement. There is no way local authorities can keep housing down at a [low price] level, because the market determines the value of the property. The more people want properties the higher it's going to go up. … In Spitalfields and some areas of the Docklands houses [are] in excess of £2,000,000 to £3,000,000.

Ten years ago you couldn't have thought that it was possible in Tower Hamlets. But there is also the good element of it. … Ten years ago nobody wanted to move to Tower Hamlets, because it was in an appalling condition. Now you have got a lot of people, who want to move to Tower Hamlets, because of … the improvement in education, because of a range of other infrastructures that have been put in. What we need to make sure is that within that the social housing element does not get lost. I am not afraid, because by standing still we are not going to go anywhere. We need to make sure that the appropriate element of housing goes to [those] who need it, [that] the social needs of that community are dealt with

Brick Lane is far more vibrant then it has ever been. If we did nothing, Brick Lane businesses wouldn't have been the way they are. … Bangladeshis own a lot of those businesses. … It's been our regeneration policy to ensure that … those businesses are turning over [and] they are making a lot more then they would have been if there was no improvement. You [have] got to look at that within that context. You [have] got to look at business, which none of us can control. What we need to make sure is that people share the prosperity of the borough. A lot of the million pound house owners are also coming to spend in the local shops. We need to make sure that that happens. It is a good way forward, and it is a prosperous element. Because by us trying to shut the doors, what we are doing, is shutting the doors of ourselves really, and we are going to slipping back rather then moving forward.

We have to make sure that the education is good enough so the Bangladeshi kids that are coming out with degrees are going to jobs in the City, are going to jobs in Canary Wharf, and are being able to compete. … The only way they are going to move forward is that they … have the basic elements to move on and then we have to make sure that racism does not stop them moving forward. We have to make sure that those conditions are right.