

Mr. Ajmat Ullah

Age: 77

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Interviewed by: Jamil Iqbal, Ansar Ahmed Ullah and Maliha Haque

Mr. Ullah owned a grocery shop and was based in Luton. Most of the Luton Steering Committee meetings were held at his flat above his shop. A dedicated campaigner and organiser, he took part in many demonstrations for the cause of Liberation. He used to have altercations with local Pakistanis and passionately defended the right of the Bengali people.

I came here in the UK with my age shown much older than I was in the documents. At that time the Government policy was that youth of 16 years of age were included in the army. I think I was about 17 or 18 years of age. I was promoted to class eight from class seven when I came here in the UK. I came here in 1956. I came to Birmingham, my brother had a fabric store here, and I joined him. We were in Birmingham from 56 to 62. Then we moved to Luton at the end of 62 where I opened a grocery shop. We had our shop in Corporate Street in Birmingham, the Council demolished it and we were moved out of the place. We couldn’t do much so we moved to Luton.

Q: Please tell us about the 71 movement?

I used to provide meeting place at my house above of my shop (55 Leagrave Road, Luton). People gathered and discussed activities regarding the movement there. Another place was provided by Raja Miah (Burhan Uddin). We raised about £22,000. Burhan Uddin used to keep the fund ledger.

Q: How did you get news of the war?

We used to get news from Gous Khan in London. He had many relatives in Luton and they provided us with information. They used to organise meeting and motivate us for raising money for the independent movement. We raised money and also participated in the movement according to our abilities. I was busy with my shop but gave my service for the cause whenever I had spare time. I went door to door to raise money. I also looked after visitors who came to meetings in Luton from Bedford and the surrounding areas.

Q: How was your feeling about the Pakistani people then?

We had good relation with the Pakistanis at the beginning. But as the war started, we had very critical relationship with one another. We were annoyed and angry with them. They used to attack us on the streets just after the war started but later we protested and used to fight them. We used to move in groups and were prepared to fight them anywhere we faced them.

The members of the Luton Action Committee were, Burhan Uddin, Abu Sayeed (passed away), Ahad Miah (passed away), Belal Miah (passed away). Most of the people have passed away. Burhan Uddin is alive. Another member, Abdul Jabbar Chowdhury is also alive. We arranged demonstrations in Luton, we also participated demonstrations in Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square in London. Usually demonstrations were held at Trafalgar Square every Sunday. We attended demonstration in London by hired coaches. On our way to London we used to collect people from smaller towns and reached our destination with 4 or 5 coaches full of people. We had a demonstration in Luton and I think 2 to 3 thousand people participated in it. There were many English and people from other nationality who participated in our demonstrations. They asked us, what was the problem, and we used to tell them about the atrocities going on in East Pakistan (Bangladesh). Some were convinced and used to participate with us. We had a big demonstration at Bury Park. We had fights on that day as the Pakistanis attacked us. The police gave us protection. We had many White people supporting us but unfortunately I can’t remember their names at this moment. I can remember some Black people supporting us, one was Mr Brown, one was Mr Smith, another was Mr Leman. I can’t remember the rest of their names.

The Pakistanis used to tell us in Urdu “Bengali machli! Wo kya karega” [what will the Bengali fish do?]. As if we Bengalis were good for nothing. They really treated us like dirt. They treated us like second class citizens. I had a Pakistani supplier. He was a good friend and was a loyal supplier of goods to my grocery shop. He used to spend all day in my shop. As the movement started he was deadly against us and used to tease us. He really showed his true colours.

How can we forget all that happened in 1971? The Pakistanis really tested our patience. Then we started protesting and taking action against them. Police used to support us very much. The police helped us very much. The White people supported us in the independence movement.

Q: How did you contact people during the war period?

We used to keep contact with our family via Karimganj in India. We used to send money or letters through Karimganj. One of the Bengalis here in Luton was from Karimganj and he helped us in delivering money and letters to our families.

The television channels used to show pictures of the fighting, demonstrations and so on. The demonstrations in Hyde Park were really big. We had gone to these demonstrations so many times. In one of the demonstration 15 to 20 thousand people gathered. Abdus Samad Azad was present in the demonstration. The Bengali people were inspired by the presence of him. Justice Abu Sayeed Choudhury was also present. They were very dedicated people and worked hard for the independence movement.

We went to see Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, at the airport, when he came to the UK on his way to Bangladesh after the liberation war ended. Lot of the people from Luton went to receive him at the airport.

Q: Where did you have your meetings in Luton?

Our meeting place was 55 Legrave Road. It was my home. We had 2 large rooms and most of the meetings were held in those rooms. We used to meet there to discuss issues like the arrangement of demonstration, raising money and so on. We used to coordinate demonstrations mainly by telephone. All the leaders of the towns used to meet in some pre-planned place and we use to decide the next programme.

We went to Birmingham to demonstrate against the tour of the Pakistan cricket team when it was due there. We went with 5-6 coaches from Luton. There were 5 to 6 thousand people around the cricket ground. Mukta Miah was a very active person in the movement. Most of the activists are no longer alive. Ibrahim Baksh was another activist of the movement. We were determined to get our country liberated. Some people were willing to give their salary and weekly wages to the fund just to get the country liberated from the heinous crime committed by the Pakistani Army. We were more determined as many of us were getting letters back from home that they are burning our houses, killing our people and so on. We also prayed to Allah to end the war and liberate our land. We had two mosques in Luton.

Q: What do you think of Bangladesh?

We were hopeful of a peaceful and prosperous Bangladesh, but now we are disheartened. All the people who went back from Bangladesh are unhappy about the situation in our country. I have settled in Bangladesh since 1994. It has been over 12 years and I have seen no change. The social fabric of the society is disintegrating slowly. Crime and poverty has gone up.

In 71, more then 90% of the people (in the UK) were illiterate and they used to work in factories. Nowadays there are many educated people and they have businesses like restaurants. The working class worked for the independence, they even participated in demonstrations leaving their job behind. We didn’t have our hope fulfilled. Most of the people including me are not happy of the situation. We fear to go to Bangladesh now. The criminal activities are more now than any time in the past.

The situation does not change when a new political party comes to power. In fact it performance gets worse than the past government. At present Awami League people are in hiding. When the Awami League will go to power, the BNP will be in hiding. This is the situation of the country for the past ten years. Members of political parties are not arrested even if they are found guilty of crime. Police cannot arrest people if they have money and good political connection.

Q: Can you tell us about your family and where they were during the war?

All of my children were born in the UK. I took them back to Bangladesh. My plan was to educate them in Bangladesh. My relatives preferred them to stay in Bangladesh for their education.

One of my sons was in Dhaka for his education. When the war started, they were lucky to survive. They were in hiding in different places for months together. The Pakistani army (not Pakistani but Indian planes were targeting Pakistani camp in nearby Naya Sarak) bombed Howapara, there were five big craters created by the bombing.

I will not see social change in my life time. How can we improve the situation, where 8 out of 10 people are dishonest? The dubious contractors make money by providing cheap materials for road development. Most of the roads need repair after three months of contract. These dubious contractors are looting millions of Taka. The responsibility does not lie only with one political party. Members of both the major parties in Bangladesh are business partners in different commercial ventures. Only Allah can help us from this mess. Some people are living a luxurious life. The rest of the people are just begging door to door.

Q: Can you tell us about the speakers in the demonstration?

I can’t remember who the main speakers were in Bury Park demonstration; probably it was Abu Sayeed Chowdhury. Local people also gave speech in the demonstrations in Luton. Muhibur Rahman was one of the local leaders. He had good connection with Sheikh Mujib. Burhan Uddin and Siddique Ali, who was a teacher, were good speakers. Members of the Luton Action Committee were very hard working people. Monwar Hossain from Bedford was a very good speaker.

Abdus Samad Azad who came to the UK was a good speaker. He delivered an eloquent and moving speech in Trafalgar Square. His speech really aroused our confidence for the liberation movement. Gous Khan was another dedicated leader and worker.

I have settled down in Bangladesh, I have a house in Sylhet; I have a garden, plants and a pond. I am happy there. My sons and daughter visit me every year.