**Mr. John Newbigin**



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Interviewed by: 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.

In January 1976, I started working with Avenues Unlimited as a youth and community worker, working with a growing number of Bengali boys who were living in this area and I worked with Avenues Unlimited as a street youth worker. I didn’t have a base; I just worked up and down Brick Lane and around Spitalfields area, until 1981. Then I remained in contact with Bengali friends and since 1990, I have been living in Stepney Green and I have been more involved in the community again in the last ten years.  
  
**Q: Were you involved in any youth movement or anti-racist struggle?**  
Yes, very much so. 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 is dealing with racism in the school was to lock the Bengali boys in a classroom at break time to stop them being beaten up. So you can imagine what was happening was that round the doors and windows of the classroom where the White kids beating on the windows, spiting on the windows saying, “We will get you when you get out”. There were kids who 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. 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 the teaching of kids, self-defence. Because their inclination when they were being attacked by group of kids or challenged by 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 lot of what we were doing at a very very simple level was beginning to built social organisations, as I said; football clubs, drama class, kung-Fu clubs, which then acquired a political dimension and particularly in 1978, Bangladesh Youth Movement, Bangladesh Youth Association, the Progressive Youth Organisation and a whole series of youth organisations grew up, that 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 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 great deal of strain. So in answer to your question, there were organisations beginning to emerge. They immerged very rapidly and had a very dynamic and positive effect in the community.



**Q: Were you involved in any of the community organisations?**  
Yes, very much so. The young people who started the organisations, they 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 a lot of it in early days was they 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 dinner afterwards, they would organise some activity and a lot of it had a social dimension; so snookers, billiards, football as well as political activity and community activity. So as a youth and community worker, myself and Caroline Adams who were working in the 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 built up a profile of their organisations.

**Q: Have you witnessed Bangladeshis being victim of racist abuse?**  
Yes, 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 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 lot of people didn’t finish work until 8 or 9 pm at 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 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 cutleries 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 the reach the climax. There was a good deal of open intimidation on the street, woman and children being shouted out, people having bricks put through their windows, shit put through their letter boxes, clothes drying on the line would be cut with razors, cars would be damaged, 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, 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. Not all the time, but particularly in the summer time, a lot of tension in the street on weekends.  
  
**Q: Were you around here, or can you remember the big demonstration regarding Aftab Ali’s murder?**  
Yes I can remember it very well indeed. In fact, on the little tarmac football pitch between Chicksand Street and Heneage Street, we started a football league, called the E1 League. Part of the idea was to give Bengali kids confidence to meet the White kids, so there was a football match going on in that evening between a Bengali team and a White team from Wapping. Just around the time Altab Ali was murdered and the football match was on. The police thought that some of the White kids involved in the football game might have been involved in the murder. It was very immediately involved in the investigated and found that they were not. It was extraordinary how there had been a lot of violence and a lot of beating ups and some how it’s true that even at the time, it was felt that, that murder was just a kind of trigger for the community that people were just not going to take any more of this kind of intimidation. The demonstration came to gather very quickly, and it was the (Bangladesh) Welfare Association which was the main force at that time, but the youth organisations also were responsible for mobilizing the community very quickly. And it was a very big and very powerful demonstration and a very forceful demonstration. And I think, that in a way for the first time the East End physically went to the West End and that was may be the first time when a lot of national press journalist began to realise, that there was some real issues were going for the community here, and that it was becoming a big community and it was under real threat of violence. It was a very important moment.  
  
**Q: Were you involved in the sit-down demonstrations in the Brick Lane?**  
There were a number of demonstrations, it was the early summer of 1978, it really was the case that people would be attacked in their homes, and the police was not interested in giving protection to people. So there was the sense of, the community have to protect itself, was very acute and very strong and it was genuinely frightening to be in that kind of atmosphere. And I do remember a big demonstration going up Bethnal Green Road, and what is now Prospect Housing Association was at that time the police station and we got as far as the police station, and quite spontaneously everybody stopped outside the police station and shout slogans, and then people began to sit down in the street and it was, may be, a few people had planned it before hand but in context of the demonstration it seemed very spontaneous, everybody just sat down in the street and it was a clear statement to the fact that the community felt that the police was not taking seriously of really basic issue of the safety of the community and it was the police’s responsibility. It was a very powerful moment to have all these people just sitting down on the street, because at that time, it is difficult to imagine it now, but I think there were lot of Bengali people were frightened to be on the street, the street did not belong to them. So the sit down in the middle of Bethnal Green Road on as busy Sunday (Saturday?) afternoon was an incredible powerful statement to say, “We have a right to be here” and it was a very, very powerful moment.  
  
**Q: Can you tell us the kind of people that were involved in this kind of demonstrations?**  
A lot of young man, lot of boys and the youth organisations and youth associations were powerful forces of the community and there were groups of school friends and also most young man were working in clothing factories. They might have eight or ten mates working in the same factory, so there was a kind of natural groups of friends, and people came together to that kind of demonstration. People from different estates came together, and of course there were people from outside, there were people who were there for political reasons, Labour Party members and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and other left organisations and from the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), there was a lot of support. But those demonstrations were essentially young man and some older man too, from the community. There were a lot of White people who lived in this area, who were very, very concerned about the racist, it was by no means just Bengalis, was very much was the manifestation of the community; the whole community living in the Brick Lane area, that’s absolutely true. It was not just purely Bangladeshi demonstrations.  
  
**Q: Do you find any relationship between the independent war of Bangladesh and the anti-racist movement, especially after the murder of Altab Ali?**  
I think a lot of people, when they came here and particularly for men when their wives and children came here. They felt very destabilized and I remember a man living up near Old Bethnal Green Road, who’s wife have been beaten up by some White kids. I remember him saying, he knew who done it and he said if I was in Bangladesh, I would kill them, burn their houses and take their rice. But here he is too frightened to do anything. I think one of the things that happened at the time of Altab Ali’s murder, was people saying, “We had enough of this”. And in that sense I think there was a kind of a rediscovery of perhaps the kind of self confidence, which had characterized what people thought during the War of Liberation and Mukti Bahini (Bengali freedom fighters) or what ever. It’s a dangerous equation to make, but I remember feeling very strongly at that time that people were almost, kind of, paralysed coming to the society, they didn’t know the rules, the rules were not clear; how should you behave, how could you behave. And this man was saying, if I were in Bangladesh, I know exactly what I do to these kids. Be here I don’t know what the consequences are. So I can’t do anything, because I fear for the safety of my wife and children.  
  
I think maybe Altab Ali murder was one of the triggers that began to change that consciousness.  
  
**Q: Were you involved in the procession of Altab Ali murder?**  
That procession was special, in the other demonstrations there were very much the young active Black and White people in the community. My recollection of that march was that it involved a much broader section of the community. It really was the whole Bengali community were out on the street, and it was a very dignified, very solemn procession. It wasn’t quite so obviously angry as some of the demonstrations that had taken place. It was a much bigger affair, I mean, I can’t think of any particular sort of incident during the course of it. But I remember that it was a very dignified and in a kind of deep way very angry demonstration. But it felt like it was much more the whole community out there then the case before.  
  
**Q: What was the housing situation?**  
It was a huge problem. One of the things was the standard housing stock in this area was unbelievably bad. I remember going to visit a family in Weaver Street, now knocked down behind Brick Lane just by the railway line, with my colleague Caroline Adams. There were 40 people more or less living in one building of four, five floors. They were sharing one toilet in the yard of the back with the beds standing in big tin cans full of water to stop the cockroaches getting at the kids at night. Unbelievable conditions and I remember Caroline saying to me, “I never seen housing as bad as this West of Istanbul, never seen anything like this in Europe”. It was unbelievable how bad a lot of the housing was.  
  
One of the issues for the housing authorities was the business which they had 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, were it was not possible to buy Halal meat and so and so, people having sometimes 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. The housing authorities were saying, “Yes we are trying to re-house people. But there was a terrible lack of understanding and a lack of sympathy from the housing authorities. In 1978, the GLC (Greater London Council) in response to this growing crisis developed a new policy, which was in essence to build, to acknowledge, that this area around Brick Lane will become a kind of ghetto, Bengali people want to house together, Ok let’s put them around Aldgate. 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”. When the Spitalfields Housing Co-op began to establish itself and I think housing Co-op 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 whole or the overwhelming force of the racism that was around in the late 1970s 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 and in housing queue these guy came from this country three months ago and he has got a flat ahead of me” and 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 and in that time again we were living in a different historical era but he GLC was the overwhelming owner of the biggest estates. Tower Hamlets housing was relatively minor compared to the GLC. There was very little understanding with GLC with the need and desires and aspirations of the Bengali community. We spent a huge amount of time as youth workers helping people to squat flats, breaking into flats, changing a lock, putting in a gas cooker, connecting the gas. So by the time the housing authority came, if you are in your flat… and if you have key on the door, they couldn’t chuck you out. And there were quite a few people who thought that I was a plumber, they didn’t realise me as a youth worker because I spent all my time fixing gas cookers in squatted flats. So I used to go to work with a little bag of tools every morning, not a kind of laptop. It was serious and that was how it was and Terry Fitzpatrick was somebody who began to organise the squatting in a very big scale, Pelham building just round the corner from here 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 then, probably 40 or 50% of it, virtually that you see now which is newly built housing was then just corrugated iron, it was so tinned up empty housing blocks which was bomb damaged, which was never been replaced or slum clearance which has never been replaced. So there was unbelievable pressure on poor old housing, and a great deal of squatting of empty property, because people felt safer then moving to what was physically better accommodation in other parts of the borough, which was not safe and which was not seem to be safe, and not seem to be connected with the other members of the Bengali community.  
  
**Q: Can you tell us the story about the child?**  
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. Obviously they invited me for a cup of tea and 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, didn’t come back and didn’t come back for an hour. I was quite worried, they didn’t seem to be terribly worried, so I said “What do you think happened to your son?” where he has gone to get the milk. So from Strafford he came back to Brick Lane to buy a pint of milk, because he didn’t know and he was too scared to use any other shops anywhere between Brick Lane and Stratford. For me that was a fantastically powerful statement that how people felt they were strangers in a foreign land. They didn’t feel it was safe, they didn’t feel it was for them, a terrible, terrible story.  
  
**Q: Can you tell us how the White people around here thought of employment and housing problems? Can you see why they deviated such a way?**  
Yes I do think the housing issue is absolutely crucial to it. The White families of this area were living in very, very poor substandard housing. They have been affected since the war; 50 thousand houses were destroyed by bombing during the Second World War in the Stepney area. It was 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 a influx of young children when the Bengali families began to arrive. Also there was pressure on jobs and the sense that the clothing trade, not a job that people particularly wanted to get into, but nevertheless, it was a work. And there was a sense that the Bengalis took over the trade and they were keeping it for themselves. So they were looking to each other to the exclusion of the White community. I think there were seeds of resentment there, which was obviously fuelled by the National Front and fuelled by other kind of racist influences in society. I think the housing and the jobs were the key driver for lot of young White people who felt that the influx of young Bengali men particularly and the community more generally represented a real threat to them.  
  
**Q: Do you see any kind of similarities between what happened in Oldham (2001) and Brick Lane in 1978?**  
I don’t know enough about Oldham and Burnley, to comment on that. But I think one of the things that which perhaps I haven’t stressed at all is that I think it is really important, In this area around Brick Lane in a very real way there was a traditional tolerance and the old established Jewish and Irish community, there were a lot of key figures in the community who were very determined to be inclusive and were very determined to build real community organisations, which included the Bengali community. That was a very powerful factor in making this immediate area, the West of Tower Hamlets safe for Bengali people and I get the sense that in Oldham and Burnley that’s not happened. There have not been that kind of core of understanding between communities, which has provided any kind of a base for people to work and live together. The Montefiore Centre (now Bethnal Green Training Centre) round the corner from here always remains as a centre, which was absolutely opened to everybody and in this immediate area that is one of the reasons why people came to Brick Lane. In and around Brick Lane people felt very safe. Not because it was an exclusively Bengali area, but because it was an exclusively peaceful area, because the Black and White got on well together. As soon as you move away from this area, North of Cheshire Street, South of Commercial Road, East of Cambridge Heath Road; that’s where the trouble began. I don’t get that sense in Oldham and Burnley, that there has ever been that kind of degree of integration in the communities. I am saying on the basis of what I have read on the newspaper, not on the basis of any personal experience.  
  
**Q: What you think of the Bangladeshi now and the White working class now; what was the basic difference?**  
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 hard and low paid, both 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 I see is where as 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 it is the young women who are pushing the boundaries, getting the jobs, establishing very clear profile for them and it’s more the young men who are looking around for some kind of an identity, and getting in the trouble or having real difficulty with finding a place for themselves in the society. Whether it’s in the job market or positioning himself or herself culturally as a part of the integrated community or do they want to emphasise on their separateness because they are running around in a gang or spending all the time in the mosque or what ever. 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.  
  
**Q: When people were squatting, what were the social activities people engaged with?**  
Most squats were very poorly furnished; a great deal of what was going on was people simply trying to pull together, lights, heat, water, gas, furniture, security; just to make things work around. As a community worker, we were constantly battling with the complete mismatch between the services provided by the local authority and the needs of the community. So whether it was education, health, housing, immigration, deportation, right to stay or what ever. Everybody had these forms, which they couldn’t understand, which needed to be kind of mediated and people needed help in filling them out and in approach in the council and there were lots of people in the community who were giving very good advice on a professional basis. There were lots of crooks and gundas (small time gangsters) who were making very fat living out of giving people very bad advice. So a lot of what we were doing as community workers, was simply providing a kind of interface between the White establishment, which was not connecting with the need of the community and the community. People didn’t understand housing benefit, they didn’t understand how to pay a gas bill, they didn’t understand how to register a complaint with the housing office. Just at the most basic level there was a need for information and communication. Actually that also was one of the driving forces behind some of the youth associations because some of the young men in the youth associations began to acquire a kind of expertise in those kinds of areas. They are the people who subsequently became councillors and became prominent people in the local community.  
  
**Q: How did the people enjoy themselves?**  
A lot of playing carom, a lot of watching videos, and the Naz cinema was still a cinema then. Although it was terrible, it was cold and always damp, people going to watch movies there. The other thing was the big tradition of drama production; people would spend a huge amount of money importing costumes from Bangladesh and may be hire a few professional actors. There were big drama production and it would go for three or four nights and there would be big function. A lot of music functions, a lot of functions with a dinner and speech. From the boys point of view, football and all those kind of things, like kids play. One of the things that have changed enormously is the drama that was a really symbolic statement of the community that could rely on it own resources. Actually if you look historically most communities, when they are in that kind of pressure, political organisations consumes a huge amount of people’s energy, so there were just meetings and meetings and meetings.  
  
**Q: Tell us about youth organisations?**  
The root to success in the late 1970s, if you want to start an organisation, you call it something, something youth Organisation. You have a function, you invite couple of councillors, couple of community workers, and couple of teachers. You have a lot of speeches, you had Biryani (Bengali dish), you have somebody with the harmonium singing a few songs, and lots of tea and then you are in business. You are a proper organisation. As youth workers in the school holidays, we used to take kids out of London. We used to walk down to French Church Street, I remember once we took 180 kids to South End for the day with their mothers. People were going to Epping Forest. I was outing once with a big group of families and some of the women were crying when we got to Epping because they didn’t know there was countryside in England. They had not seen anything except concrete, since they had arrived. It certainly struck me, you live in Sylhet, you get on a plane, you drive from Heathrow to East End, why should you believe there was anything as green as field in the whole of England. So for them going to Epping Forest was a kind of revelation and I think one of the things that we were able to do in a very small way as community workers was to let mothers and children see that there was other things going on outside the East End because people just didn’t get an opportunity to travel or to get away at all. Those kind of very simple activities, sports days, football tournaments, dramas, little performances, carom competitions, watching video tapes and all that kind of things was a really important part of being around then. I used to take groups of boys, we started a football league with the people in Aston in Birmingham, we used to go there and the big thrill was we just going to sleep on the floor of a church hall or something like that. That was when all the kind of cinemas was still running Hindi cinemas and so we (would) go and see ‘Sholay’ or ‘Amar, Akbar and Anthony’. Those epic films 2 o’clock in the morning and playing football all Sunday and come back Sunday night.  
  
**Q: Can you tell us something about Caroline Adams?**  
Caroline Adams was a really, really remarkable woman. It was an accident by God that she was born English rather than a Bengali, she just loved Bengal. She was actually in Bengal at the time of liberation (of Bangladesh in 1971). She began to work in some of the refugee camps in West Bengal. She felt completely involved to what was going on, when she came back to England, she had this huge interest in the Bengali culture and the Bengali community and it was natural for her to come and work in this area. The thing which she did really remarkable was she established a rapport with women and particularly with young mothers, the most vulnerable, the most isolated members of the Bengali community. The girls and the women who were excluded from all the political activity that the young men were engaged in. Caroline was a very unthreatening but a very forceful person and in terms of negotiation with the health authority, with the health visitors, with the housing authorities, with the education authorities. She was the master in persuading the services that they needed to respond to need of the community and she was masterful in persuading women and young women in particular to assert their rights and to assert their needs. She had a very profound understanding of Bengali culture and deep love of Bengali culture. She spoke Bengali well, and could read and write but not fluently. I remember she used to walk up and down Brick Lane and she will have children hanging on her hands, she had a kind of rapport with the women and mothers, who were so isolated from the outside world, except through Caroline. She was an incredibly important influence for whole generation of women in this community. It’s a terrible tragedy that she died as young as she did of cancer. But even in the time when she was alive, she accomplished a huge amount and really changed the perceptions of the community but also importantly the perceptions of the education and housing authorities.  
  
  
**Q: What do you think of Brick Lane now?**  
What can I say, I was sitting in the sauna bar, in Whitechapel Sports Centre, the other day and the guy I went with from the East End Snooker Club was in there and there was a guy from a TV station and was trying to persuade him to buy an advert for a thousand pounds to put on TV. And he said, “All the restaurant owner’s are putting adverts on that TV station, what’s the point, there is no Bengalis eating there, White people from the city eating in Brick Lane”. It is extraordinary how Brick Lane has changed and it occupies a completely different function in London, from what it did 15 or 20 years ago. I think that in one sense, it is both prosperity and it’s a mark of the presence and confidence of the Bengali community that Brick Lane features as prominently as it does. The tourist want to come... At the same time there is a danger that it has become a kind of Disneyland, and what people are unaware of is both the history of the community, which seems to me, is a very important thing not to forget. And also just behind the facade of Brick Lane there is still serous poverty, serious unemployment, and serious lack of opportunity and that makes me feel a little uncomfortable sometimes in Brick Lane, I have to say. May be that’s a kind of transition stage which has to happen, in another 10 or 15 years time, it will feel very different. It just feels to me that there is a kind of Disneyland element to it at the moment which is very insubstantial and… interesting to see how that plays out in the next 10 or 15 years.  
  
**Q: With the gentrification do you think the 1978 issue was relevant?**  
Yes, I think it is. I think that, there were some very remarkable people in the community at that time. They were very committed to Bengali community, which was confident and progressive and fully integrated, occupying its rightful place in London. In 1978, when the GLC began this ghetto policy, there was a lot of anger in the community and the local elections was coming up and lot of discussions in the Welfare Association and all the youth organisations about the need for the Bengali community to put up Bengali candidates to represent Bengali interest. There was a rejection of that as being a way of creating a kind of ghetto. It was important that the Bengali community worked with the political structures that already existed, and the Bengali candidates stood for the main political parties rather then for communal interest. I think that aspiration to ensure that the Bengali community occupy its rightful place as a powerful community in London; economically active, culturally active, socially having a big impact on the life of the city is the right way of doing that, rather then retreating into itself and occupying itself with it’s own concerns and shedding the rest of the world out. A lot of people fought very hard for that vision and that’s a very important vision to hold on to, and it’s something, which could quite easily be lost in a very different circumstance that we are in now. That’s why history is important, people who forget their history are condemned to relive their past, I believe that.  
  
**Q: How do you feel about the Bengali youth?**  
It’s dangerous territory for me to get into. I have lots of Bengali neighbours, I don’t have a systematic involvement with the young people. I think that period of the late 1970s, produced some very remarkable people, because tough circumstances always produce remarkable people. There was a leadership group that grew up at that time who went on to achieve some really remarkable things in politics, in business and in culture. Partly because leadership was required in those circumstances and the youth organisations and the community organisations was really encouraging young people to exercise power in a responsible way and I think one of the things that we urgently need to do as a whole community in Tower Hamlets is to find the way of giving young people now, similar leadership opportunities. The danger is the leaders of that time are now running things, the danger is that they might pull the rug behind them and forget about the kids. We are not creating pathways for the young generation of today to take over those leadership roles in the community, economically, culturally or politically and so on. They are going to be alienated and they are going to look to put their energies in other areas of activity. That is a very important issue. For me personally I am doing some work on the Bangladeshis… trying to find ways how can we create a kind of leadership programme for the young people. Because, it is really important. It is not just for the young men but also for the young women, obviously to find ways to open up for them the possibility of taking over and running organisations in the community in an effective and powerful way. In this much more complex time, that we live in now, were the dividing line between the rich and poor and the dividing line between people walk down the street with confidence and who can’t, is a much more complex process then it was in the 19970s. Nevertheless, I think that the leadership issue is crucial to the developing a kind of community consciousness, which engages with the wider community round about; doesn’t retreat into itself. And that’s the way for the Bengali community, not just in London but nationally, to really assert its power. If you think of how powerful and dynamic Bengali culture is in the whole subcontinent, Bengali people in Britain still have some way to go to really assert themselves that something which I think we all need to think about very hard and we need to think about how we construct the organisations that can express that and organisations that have put together in such a way that they allow young people to develop leadership potential.  
  
**Q: Can you tell us about the media portrayal?**  
I think it was schizophrenic, and this is how news media works. I remember in 1978, you get a call from BBC producer saying, “We want 10 Bengali kids” and one week they will want, ten pathetic Bengali kids, who were terrified and the next week they want, ten tigers who can fight. Hang on I used to say “Do you want to have people who represent the community” or “Do you want people who represent the stereotypes of what the community is”, either they are all out there being angry Bengalis fighting back or all they are being pathetic terrified Bengalis being beaten up by the National Front. The news media found it very difficult to get engaged with what was really going on, that’s always the case in a crisis like that. But the level of ignorance was extraordinary, it really struck me that now all the media talk about Bengalis and Bangladesh. It is not that long ago since, everyone was a Paki, quite honestly. People had no idea what the difference between all the different communities in London were. It’s modest progress; I think the interesting thing is that what has changed that is not the news media, what changed that is books and films and food, those kinds of social and cultural things that communicates differences between cultures of the people rather then what they get in the news media.  
This was a completely schizophrenic approach that the people did know that this was a pathetic community that was a victim of violence, whether this was a kind of fighting community that is going to come out and establish itself.  
  
**Q: Story about the East End Advertiser?**  
East End Advertiser (local newspaper) never chose to really present the Bengali community as anything other than a problem, what was 1970s. That was partly reflected in their letters’ pages, where they would say, they were simply reflecting the concerns of their readers, but they ran all kind of letters which really was horrific which people complained about the strange people with the 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 was comparing the letters, which people wrote to the East London advertiser in the 1970s complaining about their Bengali neighbour and the letter which people wrote to the advertiser 60, 70 and 80 years before complaining about their Jewish neighbour 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 End 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 advertiser right now, but in the 1970s, it was certainly part of the problem not part of the solution.