**Ms. Shila Thakor**



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Interviewed by: 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.

**Shila Thakor & Mithu Ghosh

Shila Thakor**
I first came to Tower Hamlet’s in 1978, the period until I went to fulltime university study, I was working as a secretary. I did a lot of administration type work. I was a youth worker and I had part time jobs in different offices around Tower Hamlet’s up until I went to North London Polytechnic to do my teaching degree.

**Mithu Ghosh**
I am an independent housing consultant, working for London Borough of Tower Hamlets. I first came to Tower Hamlets I think in 1979, where I joined the Tower Hamlets Law Centre as immigration housing lawyer. After that I left and went to America for about 6-7 months. Once I came back I worked in a community based project called Spring Board, which was linked to the local college and helped people with English as second language, in studying and then getting jobs. Most of the students were Bengali youngsters. After that I joined the GLC, before the transfer, in the Race Relation Housing Action Team. From the time of Spring Board and onward, I started becoming involved in the community and community organisations etc. I was working within the council, I saw the differences between how council treated the community etc. Working for the Law Centre I represented quite a few people in their immigration cases, and they were really badly treated by the High Commission of Bangladesh in particular.

**Q: Why did you set up Jagonari?**

(Shila Thakor speaking)
At that time there wasn’t anything that was particularly for women in terms of self development or support from council or training. There were huge organisations that tended to be for men. Few of us got involved and it wasn’t easy for us. What we wanted to set up was something that involved child care with training. You can’t have training with out child care. And that 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 place as a meeting place, somewhere you could go. Because even somewhere like Montefiore, was very male dominated so even if you went to the canteen in the Montefiore, you didn’t feel like it was somewhere for you to go. We wanted to have this big open place where women could go and café like kitchens. All the different kinds of training that we thought people wanted and we all came from different background and we could use our experiences, but then we realised that one place is not enough, because Tower Hamlets is big and people don’t walk too far to go to places. We were actually thinking about one place and having satellite around the borough, which was our original plan. So really it was because there wasn’t really anything that was accessible and that included young women and older women.

**Q: Do you remember how many organisations were there at that time?**
(Mithu Ghosh Speaking)

There was Bangladesh Youth Movement, Youth Forum, Youth League, FBYO came later. They were male dominated, they had some women. So in their agenda, it was for everyone. The other thing that was happening at the same time was, there was a lot interest for Bengali women in the white female councillors. They were also trying to muscle in it as well because it looked good on their credentials and especially for the GLC councillors to be seen to be doing something for women. I think that there was political agenda there as well. As far as the male organisations were concerned, even 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. Originally we were going to be part of the Davenant Centre, we will have one room in the Davenant Centre and that would have been called just the woman group. Then the GLC was on its way out and especially because of this political interest, they were giving money out at that time. There was an empty plot next to Davenant Centre and we bid for that, thinking of we are going to get that. We did and they gave us grant not even a loan. They gave us a grant to actually do the building, which is the Jagonari Centre now.

**Q: How many of you were involved in this?**
(Mithu Ghosh speaking)
In the core group we had three or four, but then we got lot more people involved to do things. One group would do the writing of the application and meetings and other people would do other things. Some other people would get women involved.

(Shila Thakor speaking)
We had Pola Uddin and Alma Choudhury. We all had different strengths, that’s why it worked. “I am your administrator and the paper work person”, so I could keep that side of things going. We all did our work. Alma was quite good at mobilizing people. Between four of us we did work what we were good at.

**Q: What was your activity when you started the centre?**
(Shila Thakor speaking)
We were all involved in different thing, 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 at Spring Board, Pola used to run the maternity services for pregnant women, mostly Bangladeshi and Somali women. Alma was involved with regeneration. So we all had our separate work places.

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
We actually did lot of activity before Jagonari came up. We did a film on Channel Four. There were two films, there was one about the Bengali male youth and there was one about women in Tower Hamlets. Infact there was three films in channel 4. They commissioned that and we researched it and we got lot of the women we knew involved in that and there was a local film maker who actually made the film. So we were involved in that. In my work I was involved in anti-racist campaigns. There is a video, actually we made there with lot of famous people in there. Art Malik was in the video! I was involved in anti-racist training from my work. We brought 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 day, we used to go and speak at them. We were representing women. I in particular had to be careful because I work for the council. Later on it became more difficult, when the Liberals came in as well. I had to be little bit careful because I wasn’t too political. Before the building was built, we got women architects who worked with us. We helped them plan the building, we told them basically what the brief should be and what we wanted within the building. Even to the façade of the building and the kind of brick 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 building there from Bangladesh and India. Pillars, columns, windows arts and colours, we wanted all that and the design and they met that design. Original building was a lot bigger and more costly. With the grant given we could not meet all that.

**Q: Why the name Jagonari was selected?**
(Mithu Ghosh speaking)

There were lot of other things like Bangladesh Youth Movement, we didn’t want something like that or Women Centre or something. We wanted something different. It was from Nazrul’s poem—Jagonari. When we were actually doing the film, one of the thing was a voice over of this woman reading the poem and it was so beautiful and we though it good and because it was what we were trying to do.

(Shila Thakor speaking)
There was this older Bengali woman who used to join us sometimes, she actually in a meeting sang it and when she sang it, for us we thought it was the right meaning what we were trying to do. A lot of people who were involved in it agreed it and it was men who argued with us.

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
It must have stood the test of time because no one has changed it. Because if you feel so much hate, the first thing they would have done would have changed it. So no matter what the criticism it must have meant something.

**Q: When you thought of opening a totally different centre for women, what did the local Bangladeshi men or other organisations think of the idea?**

(Shila Thakor speaking)
We were lucky, we had the Davenant Centre, because the Davenant Centre was a committee of men and we joined in with them. So it became a project of Davenant Centre and Jagonari. We had the support of very strong people.

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
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 supportive. There were some criticism and suspicion. It was more teasing then really anything serious. Then there was the mosque which was built after Jagonari. Once it was known what Jagonari was, 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 this 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 a quite a lot of support. We had the support of a lot of strong people in the community.

**Q: Were you racially attacked or abused anytime?**
(Mithu Gosh speaking)

I wasn’t. Few kids used to say Paki go home when I wore sari. To the contrary, because I used to go to a lot of very hostile meetings as part of my work, they used to say things like, “O, you are alright, you can speak English, but it's them lot” and I used to say “I am one of them lot”. There was already then, if you could speak English, if you stood up yourself, you are alright. If you couldn’t, the abuse was terrible. It was really vile at that time.

(Shila Thakor speaking)
Not personally. There was a family who lived in Shadwell. They had to live in a very White estate with three children and I don’t know how I got involved but I did. I think it was because I worked as a youth worker. We were very scared. My work was with young children. At that time Socialist Worker Party were taking over. They would protect neighbours who were victimised. They were guarding his house. I got to know his wife. I got involved with them because they had graffiti and letter box and window smashed. That was horrible.

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
That’s when the Race Housing Action Team was setup in the GLC that was the first of this kind in London. A specialist team specifically funded for that purpose. Our job was to make sure the policies and procedures were there but also when people needed help, that help was there. We were the first people to actually prosecute a perpetrator, and also we took out a possession group proceedings. Very, very few things were happening in those days. Normally what happened, if there was racial harassment, the council just moved them. That of course made White estate White. We used to have reception committee, so if they saw Bengali person going to view a property, then this large crowd and before they even got in there, they would be frightened off or their places would have been trashed. That section within the council was setup.

One thing we found was a difficulty between English feminism and what Bengali women really needed. English feminism was 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, lot of the time we found ourselves actually arguing against other women. Saying that, that might be what feminism is in general, but you have to moderate it when you are talking about Asian woman in particular. You can’t just go barging in and saying you should do this, you should do that. Because you 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, for all the best in the world could have actually jeopardized it quite considerably. They made Jagonari seem to be too radical, so we actually had to make sure that the balance was there.

**Q: How did you mobilise women to the centre?**

(Shila speaking)
Woman at that time were very traditional, but until you do something, you don’t know and they started to come out. There was lots of young people who were doing their O levels and A-levels. Doing some higher qualifications and there was 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 the full day care so it was suitable for people who come to work in the centre. They are the ones who tended to get involved, because they were using the centre. The other thing is when we set up trainings, they got involved through that. We had contact with the colleges, who would 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. So the training in the building and training elsewhere, and the common thing is we look after the children.

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
Lots of because all of us were involved in other groups like MSLS, they also had women. Our mothers at that time had another group called ASHA, and that was mainly for younger women. So we were able to tap into those from our other work and tell them about Jagonari. Mind you it didn’t need much telling because there was the building going up and there was a lot of interest in it anyway.

(Shila Thakor speaking)
We could mobilise people from different areas because I was in education and training teachers and I did this course that was for Bangladeshi students so I had all my contacts there and going schools, you meet people, getting involved in the ‘Bangladeshi Education Needs in Tower Hamlets’ that was a big campaigning group to get our people into schools, and also the wives of all the men.

(Mithu Ghosh speaking)
Because there were all these Bangladeshi youth groups around, so we tapped into them, saying if you are so interested and supportive, then bring your wives. Most of them did and lots of their wives joined Jagonari and either became employed by Jagonari or went did something else

**Q: Why did you leave Jagonari?**
(Shila Thakor speaking)
There were quite a lot of people involved in it with a lot of interest. There were people who were interested for being in the managing committee and wanted leading role and that’s what they wanted. Actually the four of us have been doing this for a long time and may be we were a bit possessive and other people had different thought to us about how they wanted regarding the direction of the organisation. Basically the power who they wanted to run it, and they were mostly Bangladeshis. We are all busy in our work life, and busy managing and doing it. So we didn’t really seen what was going on. Behind the scene there was mobilisation of “vote for me and not for them” going on. They used their own strategies and techniques, when people wanted to take over. There was an Annual General Meeting and we got a shock that day.

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
I left in about 1991 because it was just after Rebecca was born. I left shortly after that, I left Tower Hamlets.

**Q: What was the shock?**

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
It was just other people wanted to be the chair and the secretary. We haven’t seen such good mobilising! And they did a good job and they learnt! There were quite a lot of women, and some of them were there thinking what was going on and why they were there. They were just told to come and vote. So we didn’t understand and we didn’t want an argument or fight or anything.

(Shila Thakor speaking)
I think 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. We never really went back after that.

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
I left Tower Hamlets after that and returned Tower Hamlets after 15 years. 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 speaking)
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”.

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
While I was living in Bristol, I used to get calls to Bristol and get informed about Jagonari.

(Shila Thakor speaking)
But it settled down a bit now, and there are things going on now, there was no day care for long time. They couldn’t get together to do that and the building was empty wasn’t much going on. But they got some good management there now.

**Q: Are there any other group apart from Jagonari?**

(Shila Thakor speaking)
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 and you had Vietnamese. To be honest, I think a lot it is the same, because in 1970s and 1980s, 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 feel like that. I do lots of work with Sure Start and isolation is still the number one. Professional support or outside intervention comes later, you just need having links with our people. But even though somebody may have grown up in this country and then going to having children and also the next generation getting married now and the wives coming from abroad and they have the sense of isolation.

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
The younger generation and if you look at them now they are far sharper, in fact too sharp. I think they are able to stand up much more for themselves.

**Q: Can you tell us about funding, was it from the community?**

(Shila Thakor speaking)
That was difficult. The GLC’s (grant) was one off grant for the building. Revenue, to run it was difficult. What happened then was that council became Liberal. They did not like us. They weren’t giving any funding for a long time.

(Mithu Ghosh speaking)
We went to all sorts of places. I remember doing a business plan, I did not know what a business plan was. I thought of doing one. There was a consortium of businesses, so we went to them and I think we did get that funding.

(Shila Thakor speaking)
We had enough funding for a centre manager and someone to do administration office work and the crèche. Still the funding wasn’t enough so we rented the room upstairs of the building to a training agency and they paid us rent. The whole time we were there, we were in debt.

**Q: How are they running now?**

(Shila Thakor Speaking)
They have problems with funding still now. They get some money from Sure Start to do some project work and there are people going in and running their training sessions there. They have to pay the Jagonari. I think they might get some mainstream funding from council. There will be some money coming in from the rent of the hall as well. We tried to run a cafeteria for a while, it was Pola’s idea. Somebody ran the café, so people will go and buy Bengali food and lunch.

**Q: What do you think of Brick Lane then and Brick Lane now?**

(Shila Thakor speaking)
I didn’t really go there. I wouldn’t walk down there then. Not now, now is OK, but not then. It was so depressing, now that they have all the cosmetic work, behind it, it was depressing. All it was was some café, mosque and restaurants. There wasn’t anything there to go to. There were mainly cafes but not these flashy restaurants now. There wasn’t any reason really to go down there

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
I used to live just in front of Brick Lane and even in those days it started changing, became far busier. I remember people never used to shop in Brick Lane. They used to go to Cannon Street Road for their fish, meat, vegetables. As big grocery shops were opening and people started going there and certainly the Aldgate end became far busier, as you walk down, apart from the market days it was very deserted on the other end. I think Taj store changed a lot. People went there to shop. Housing development started up and as more houses were built around Brick Lane.

(Shila Thakor speaking)
There were some prostitution down Brick Lane as well and we see woman walking up and down. If you did walk, you will be treated like the prostitute.
(Mithu Gosh speaking)

A friend of ours was attacked there. It is bad enough for any woman, especially women who didn’t wear the tradition clothing, people passed on rude comments.

(Shila Thakor speaking)
You would not go there because you will be said, “come here”.
Now people will call you to come to his restaurant. It’s not in the sexual way it was ten years ago.

**Q: Do you remember the killing of Altab Ali?**

(Mithu Ghosh speaking)
I came here after the incident. But I remember the huge painting of Dan Jones, ‘who killed Altab Ali’, that huge painting of all those people and the blood tricking down. It was a fantastic work done. I used to work in the Law Centre, and we had some Bengalis in the management committee, so I heard a lot about it.

(Shila Thakor speaking)
There were some people who were involved in politics in Bangladesh, and were actually quite politically aware, they were the ones who are good at mobilising people and say “this is not right, there is something wrong here and we need to do something about it and we don’t have to put up with it”.

(Mithu Gosh speaking)
And there were lots of rallies and marches and we attended and spoke in most of them. Not in the early part but in the later parts when people were more confident with us. I remember some of the events in those days, one in the park on the same day as Live Aid 1985. It was a massive park and something happened, I can’t remember what. There were regular things happening, because National Front was still quite alive and kicking then even in the mid 1980s. I still got the picture. There were still legal battle going on about them, not to be allowed to sell Nazi pamphlets and I remember all that. May be they weren’t as aggressive anymore because the Bengali youth were getting stronger. But I remember in the 1980s, what used to happen was more fighting in Bengali restaurants. All these thugs would come in and beat up the waiters and go off without paying and 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. There were quite a few incidents, they (police) were in action or picking up Bengali kids instead. The 1980s were more of that kind of struggle rather then against the group themselves. They were gone underground, but they were still orchestrating things in the background.