

ALTAB ALI – THE POLITICAL HERE TO STAY, HERE TO FIGHT!

More than three decades have passed since Altab Ali was murdered on that election night of 4 May 1978. Cut down in cold blood by racists, his memory nevertheless lives on.

To a generation of activists the name Altab Ali conjures up not only a time of great pain but also a time of resistance. A time when a movement was built that fought against racism and for the rights of all who live in London's East End regardless of the colour of their skin or their religious background.

The racists sought to totally isolate the Bengali community but in response the anti-racists – black and white – built alliances that have lasted a generation. It was a time when the Bengali youth created a movement that empowered their community and left a legacy that endures today.

Rajonuddin Jalal, who was one of the founders of the Bangladesh Youth Movement (BYM), recalled:

"I was involved in the formation of the Bangladesh Youth Movement (BYM). The BYM was the brainchild of the late Shahjahan Lutfur Rahman, a teacher and barrister. It was a crucial youth organisation organising against the then National Front (NF) back in 1978. I was involved in setting up many cultural projects in Tower Hamlets, for example The Kobi Nazrul Centre.

"The youth movement played an important role against the fascists when they became organised and active in Brick Lane area, following the murders of Altab Ali and Ishaq Ali. BYM was one of the leading organisations that organised the first protest march that involved thousands of Bengalis coming out in the streets of London, marching from Whitechapel to the House of Commons and back. The slogan was 'Here to stay, here to fight.'"

Asked what the purpose of the BYM was he says:

"If you go back to 1976, then you



would find that the existence of the community was not really acknowledged in the wider arena so having a youth movement as an organisation itself was an important achievement. Later on it became a very important organisation in that it was mobilising the community against racism, racial attacks and racist agitation as well.

"So it was an organisation that mobilised the young people and the community at large, it gave a voice to the community, it organised to support people who were victims of racial attacks on housing estates, and on streets. Later on it played a role in politicising the community."

As the battle on the streets came to their conclusion by the end of 1978, the youth leaders and youth organisations redefined the agenda for the future. They established a national organisation, the Federation of Bangladeshi Youth Organisation (FBYO), which involved the following organisations: Bangladesh Youth

Movement; Bangladesh Youth Association; Progressive Youth organisation: Bangladesh Youth League Birmingham, Sunderland Bengali Youth Organisation; Bangladesh Youth Approach; Shapla Youth Force; Weavers Youth Forum; Bangladesh Youth League; Bangladesh Youth League Luton; Eagle Youth Organisation; Overseas Youth Organisation; Hackney Bangladesh Youth Organisation, Wallsall Youth Organisation; Bradford Youth Organisation and the League of Joi Bangla Youth amongst others.

The FBYO also published the bilingual *Jubobarta* magazine and was involved in the production of three documentary films for Channel 4.

The Bangladeshi community could no longer be ignored. The government of the day launched the Home Affairs Select Committee Report on Bangladeshis. The Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Equality (THARE) and the FBYO played a key role in compiling this

