

ASIAN YOUTH MOVEMENTS IN THE UK: HISTORY AND LEGACY

The Asian Youth Movements formed in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, as second generation South Asian people mobilised against racism. Following on from our articles on Black Lives Matter and the early UK Black Panther movement, we take a closer look at their membership, their aims and campaigns, and their legacy within the UK today.

Formation and History

The Asian Youth Movements (AYMs) of the 1970s were formed of second-generation South Asians who mobilised in response to racism within their communities. Inspired by the civil rights and Black Power movements, they campaigned against racism in Britain: from racist attacks on the street to racism in the police, within schools and in immigration and housing laws.

In *Black Star: Britain's Asian Youth Movements*, author Anandi Ramamurthy, Senior Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University, gives a detailed picture of the AYM and their history. The parents of AYM members had immigrated to the UK from countries on the Indian sub-continent but the members themselves were mostly born in the UK and expressed their desire to be accepted as equal citizens who belonged in Britain.

The AYM were largely local movements and often formed in the wake of a specific incident. The Southall Youth Movement (SYM), for example, formed in 1976 after the murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar, the victim of a racist attack. In the wake of this, SYM organised peaceful protests to demand justice for Chaggar and his family.

While AYM and their aims were specific to their local environment, a closer look at two campaigns sheds light on their activities.

Altab Ali and the Newham Asian Youth Movement

On 4 May 1978, a Bangladeshi man named Altab Ali was murdered in Whitechapel. His death led to widespread campaigning against racism

and the organisation of anti-racism movements in East London.

Racism towards East London's Bangladeshi community was common. An activist at the time describes life in the 1970s:

We were scared to go out alone. Our movements were limited to three essential destinations: home, workplace



Rushanara Ali, MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, and others attend a remembrance in Altab Ali Park on 4 May 2017. Image courtesy of the Ansar Ahmed Ullah/Altab Ali Foundation.

and shops. It was like living under curfew and no place was safe.

He goes on to describe how National Front members would pour petrol into letter boxes and break their windows with bricks. Bangladeshi residents in East London at the time recall businesses being vandalised, being abused at school and on the streets, and living in a culture of fear.

Altab Ali's death was racially motivated: the BBC reports that three teenagers attacked Ali due to his skin colour, one of whom was later convicted of Ali's manslaughter. Ali's death caused widespread anger and led to a march of thousands of people behind Ali's coffin to Downing Street.

In *Black Star*, Ramamurthy explains how demonstrations such as this cut across the depiction in Britain at the time of Asians as 'victims'. Rather, she argued that the campaigns and organisation of the AYM were an expression of self-help and unity amongst South Asians and other minority ethnic groups.

Over the years after the attack, far-right groups lost their influence in East London. In 1998, St Mary's Park, the scene of the murder, was renamed Altab Ali Park. Today, Tower Hamlets is an ethnically diverse area of London: in the 2011 census, 55% of the population described themselves as belonging to a group other than "white".

Asian Youth Movements and the Anwar Ditta campaign

AYMs also campaigned against issues such as immigration policy, which they said unfairly discriminated against people from minority ethnic groups. Supporting the Anwar Ditta Defence Campaign is one example of how the AYM organised in this way.

In an article for the *Our Migration Story* project, Dr Anandi Ramamurthy explains the story. Anwar Ditta was born in the United Kingdom but was sent to live with family in Pakistan as a child. While in Pakistan, she married and had three children. In 1975 she returned to the UK, leaving her children in Pakistan. As a British citizen Ditta had freedom of movement but her children, who were born in Pakistan, did not and had to apply to enter the country.

Ditta applied for her children to come to England in September 1976 and was interviewed by immigration authorities in February 1978. In May 1979, the Home Office declared it was not satisfied that the three children were related to her, despite photographs, birth certificates and other evidence. In an article in 1999, the Guardian reported that "because she had lied about her age when she had married at 15, and then later married again legally, the immigration authorities insisted the

children belonged to a different Anwar Ditta".

The Manchester and Bradford AYM took up the cause of Anwar Ditta. While the two AYM were distinct organisations, they often supported each other's activities and worked together on this occasion to organise the Anwar Ditta Defence Campaign. They teamed up with The Anwar Ditta Defence Committee and other groups such as the Indian Workers Association to organise demonstrations, lobby MPs and increase awareness of Ditta's situation. In 1981, after providing blood tests as proof, Anwar Ditta was finally reunited with her children. *Coming In from the Cold*, an archives project initiated by the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust to increase diversity in archives, is now cataloguing the archive of Anwar Ditta.

Impact of the AYM

Joining and forming the AYM in the 1970s had a significant influence on present-day activists. For example, Suresh Grover, one of the Southall AYM's founding members in the 1970s, is now the director of The Monitoring Group, an anti-racist grassroots group which campaigns on behalf of families and communities. In a recent conversation with the UCL Centre for the Study of Racism and Racialisation, he tells how his experience as a member of the local AYM in his youth inspired his career.

To increase awareness of the AYM and their history, an archiving project at the Department of Humanities, University of Central Lancashire, has digitised large amounts of historical AYM materials, including photographs, literature and contemporary newspaper articles. The aim of the project, named Tandana, is to allow as many people as possible to access the history and heritage of the movements.

Further reading

- Anandi Ramamurthy, *Black Star: Britain's Asian Youth Movements*, 2013
- Jasbir Singh, 'Recollections on the Asian Youth Movements that emerged in the 1970s', Institute for Race Relations, 31 October 2019



Allies of the Anwar Ditta Defence Committee march in solidarity through the streets of Rochdale. Image courtesy of the Anwar Ditta collection.