

How a racist murder of Altab Ali changed the way the Bengalis saw themselves in Britain

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Altab Ali Park was only named as such in 1998. Before it was called St Mary's Park, the site of a 14th Century white church called St Mary's Matfelon from which the local area – Whitechapel- derives its name. It was bombed in the Blitz during World War II, and a lightning strike a few years later finished it off, only a few graves stones remain today.

Tighter immigration legislation introduced in the 1960's and 1970's gave legitimacy to the idea that newly arrived settled Bengalis from East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh in 1971) in Spitalfields did not belong here. As officially sanctioned second-class citizens, immigrants became an easy target for attack and could be blamed for everything. In 1978, very real blood was spilled near this park.

The present London's Bengali community have their roots in East Bengal, the land at the top of the Bay of Bengal between Burma and India. When India was partitioned in 1947, this land became 'East Pakistan', geographically divided from 'West Pakistan' one thousand miles away.

East Pakistan's dissatisfaction with this situation, in which most political power remained in West Pakistan, led to a war. In December 1971, East Pakistan formally seceded from its partner to create the independent state of Bangladesh.

Lone 'Lascar' seamen from East Bengal had arrived in London during the 19th and 20th centuries and some had settled in East London. Ayub Ali from Sylhet, a region of Bangladesh, established a café on Commercial Road in the 1920s. This became a centre for the small community. Numbers grew during the 1960s.

Job opportunities in London were limited to low-paid and unskilled jobs in small factories and the textile trade. The Bengali community bore the brunt of racist activity of the 1970s. Some provocative National Front marches in Brick Lane ended in violence.

On 4 May 1978, on the eve of local elections, the year before Margaret Thatcher came to power, a local leather garments worker by the name of Altab Ali was murdered in a racist attack and left in a pool of blood in the Whitechapel road. He worked in Hanbury Street, off Brick Lane, and was heading home past the park to Wapping when he was attacked by a group of racists.

In fact throughout the 1970s racist attacks on the Bengali community had increased. Bricks were thrown through windows, excrement smeared over doors and Bengali families felt too intimidated to leave their homes. Politicians and the mass media pinned much of the blame for this violence on the 'skinheads' of the ultra-reactionary National Front. They also blamed immigrants themselves for 'not mixing' while the police even accused families around the area of setting fire to their homes for insurance purposes.

These explanations of course simply hid mainstream scape goating when in the late 1960's the post-war boom subsided into bust and recession hit Britain. Trade union leaders and the TUC (Trade Union Congress) demanded stiffer measures to keep immigrants out, encouraging a view that white were being driven from their jobs by blacks and Asians, rather than by government failure. The idea of too many workers chasing too few jobs became popular and demands to protect 'British jobs British workers', a common slogan. These ideas spurred violent racist attacks on the ground.

By the mid-1970's a number of local youth movements, realising that they would have to defend themselves, united with anti-racists under the umbrella of the Asian Youth Movement. They were influenced by the ideas of radical solidarity movements in the US and attempted to reclaim the streets from the racists, confronting them head on when they attempted to smash up Bengali shop fronts in Whitechapel Road and in Brick Lane. In the streets racist abuse and violence was a real threat. The role of the left organisations, active in the labour movement and in specific anti-fascist and anti-racist campaigns, was crucial to street mobilisations that confronted fascists. Whatever the revolutionary left's inadequacies, the Asian youth met active support, from white leftists who stood for workers' unity and socialism.

In this period it is worth noting, being anti-racist meant you believed there was only one race, the human race. Anti-racists campaigned against ideas of racial difference, against all forms of discrimination and for equal treatment for all and when it came to jobs and wages, for unity between black, white and Asian workers.

Racist violence and killings produced a radicalisation. The racist murder of a Sikh youth, Gurdip Singh Chaggar, in Southall in June 1976, and the killing of a Bengali garment worker, Altab Ali, in the East End of London in May 1978 led to the creation of new youth movements. Tariq Mehmood and Tarlochan Gata-Aura formed the UBYL. The name is significant, stressing, "Black" rather than "Asian"; they looked for "Black" unity.

In the East End the killing of Altab Ali brought Bengalis out onto the streets as the community began to organise; the Bengali youth organisations were formed. Rajonuddin Jalal was involved in the formation of the Bangladesh Youth Movement (BYM), which was a crucial youth organisation struggling against the then National Front in 1978. He was involved in setting up many cultural projects in Tower Hamlets, including the Kabi Nazrul Centre. The BYM was one of the leading organisations, which coordinated the biggest protest march from Whitechapel to the House of Commons.

“I was involved in the formation of the Bangladesh Youth Movement (BYM), which was a crucial youth organisation organising against the then National Front (NF) from back in 1978. I was involved in setting up many cultural projects in Tower Hamlets, for example The Kabi Nazrul Centre. The youth movement played an important role, against the fascist when they became organised and active in Brick Lane area, following the murder of Altab Ali and Ishaq Ali back in 1978. BYM was one of the leading organisations that organised the first protest march that involved about 2000 of Bengalis coming out in the streets of London, marching from Whitechapel to the House of Commons and back. And the slogan was ‘Here to stay, here to fight’”.

When asked what was the function of the BYM, he replies:

“If you go back to 1976, then you would find that the existence of the community was not really acknowledged in the wider arena and so having a youth movement as an organisation itself was an important achievement. Later on in 1978, following the murder of Altab Ali and Ishaq Ali, it became a very important organisation in that it was mobilizing the community against racism, racial attacks and organised racist agitation as well. So it was an organisation that mobilised the young people, it mobilised the community at large, it gave a voice to the community, it organised people 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.”

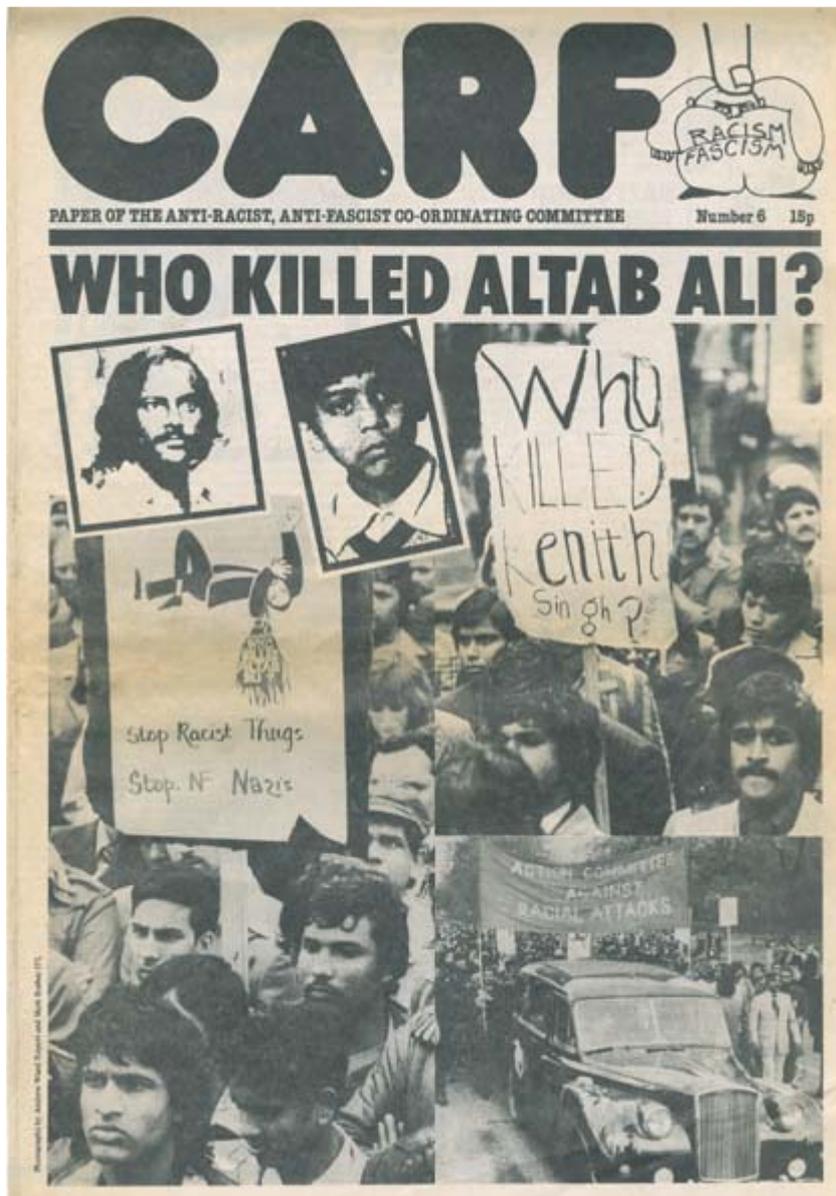
He continues to say that:

“So you would find in early ‘80s young people were taking part in the political process. Many of the people, who used to be involved with the Bangladesh Youth Movement, are now councillors in Tower Hamlets. So historically it was a very important organisation, it happened to be there in the right time, mobilising the community and therefore significant from that point of view.

The fact that there is a Bengali member of parliament in Tower Hamlets now can be seen a direct result of these events. For Jalal, the event of the murder of Altab Ali had far reaching affects on the way that the Bengali community see themselves in the Britain today.

The Asian Youth Movements (AYMs) of the 1970s and 1980s were powerful examples of political movements influenced by black politics and a version of secularism that became a unifying force between different religious communities. Anandi Ramamurthy drawing on interviews with participants in the youth movements and material collected together for the ‘Tandana-Glowworm’ digitised archive of AYM ephemera, the author contextualises the AYM in the political history of Asians in Britain, he analyses their distinctive political stance and describes the leaflets, magazines and posters which they produced. The legacy of the AYM, it is argued, lies in their example of organising politically at the grass roots across religious divides.

Below is an example of the front cover of a magazine showing photographs of crowds of people at Altab Ali's funeral protesting at his death.



Edition 6 of 'CARF', the paper of the Anti-Racist, Anti-Fascist Co-ordinating Committee, was printed in 1978. The front page has photographs of scenes from the funeral of Altab Ali, a young Bengali who was stabbed to death in a racist attack in Adler Lane, Whitechapel. Ali's death became a symbol of race hatred in the area and sparked a protest march. On 14 May, 7,000 Bengalis gathered in Brick Lane to join the largest demonstration by Asians that had been seen in Britain. A park in the centre of Whitechapel has been named after Altab Ali to commemorate his death.

The name and character of the park is part of the establishment of the Bengali community of this area of East London, also containing a memorial to the Bengali Martyrs, another major event in East Bengal's history in which led to the Bengali Language Movement in 1952.

After Altab Ali's murder, his coffin was carried to Whitehall in a long procession led by thousands of Asian youth and anti-racists, highlighting the anger many felt at the government's failure to do anything about racist attacks, at the level of police racism and criminalisation by the government of immigrant communities.

However most young Bengalis born or those arrived after 1978 don't even know that Altab Ali existed or that he was killed in a racist murder nearby.

Some attempts by publically funded organisations like the Tower Hamlets Summer University (now known as Futureversity) have tried to educate the local young people about local history and commissioned a film company called Loud Minority to make a documentary film about the racist murder of Altab Ali. The Summer University discovered that Altab Ali Park was very near to the Summer University premises, but none of the students knew who it was named after, or why. They got young people to look through local history archives, and discovered that Altab Ali was a Bengali factory worker, who had been murdered in that park in "a random" attack by racists. They found out that in the context of the widespread, vicious racism of 1970s Britain, the death provoked a huge response, particularly from the Bengali community in the East End of London. They go onto say that many people date the rise of the community's self-confidence and present-day political influence, to the reaction to the murder of Altab Ali. The film was joint winner, Guy Ritchie Young Film Makers Competition 2004.

Alternative indymedia ran a story/campaign for Altab Ali station -call to name Aldgate East after martyr in 2007. This went largely unreported by local press and media, including the local Bengali press.

London Borough of Tower Hamlets response to name the park after Altab Ali was untypical in that it preceded a particular hostile Liberal local authority towards the Bengali community. The Labour local authority made amends by commissioning an ornamental wrought iron gateway arch at the entrance to the park. It includes interwoven bands of orange-coated metal wrapped around and interwoven through the tubular framed structure decorate a black tubular framed arch, Bengali in style.

An ironwork arch memorial built by Stepney Neighbourhood was put up the in St Mary's Gardens. Labour controlled Stepney had commissioned a Welsh artist/blacksmith David Petersen to carry out the work.

"Stepney Neighbourhood decided to provide the arch not only as a memorial to Altab Ali himself but also to recognise the turning point in the struggle against racism that his death marked" said a spokesman'.

The final design was based on Bangladeshi architecture and European Perpendicular architecture, a marrying of two cultures, the new community in the area and to represent the original church of St Mary's which had stood on the site. On the opening day the children in local primary schools made hats in the shape of the arch and carried red carnations and walked through the arch; part of the Bengali culture is to pass through an arch at all important events e.g. marriage and death.