

Remembering the 1970s

Cathy Forrester (Peters)



Ms. Forrester (Peters) moved to the Chicksand Estate in 1962 when she was ten years old. As a local resident she experienced the problems faced by the Bengali community in Brick Lane. She stood up for the cause of the Bengali community in the late 1970s and was beaten, dragged and arrested by the police when a fight broke out between youth groups.

..... I am living in this area all my life basically. I first moved into this little bit of the area in 1962, I was only eleven years old then.

..... and every one of my neighbours apart from me is Bengali..... I won't move away...



..... Brick Lane was a very busy place, very run down; now it is nothing like how it was. They are all modernised, and regenerated; which is a good thing for the area. In our day, it was still a lot of curry shop as it is today. But there were lot of Jewish shops as well. The sweet shops and the hardware shops but you don't see none of them today; it's pure restaurants in Brick Lane today. We had sari shops and dried fish shops and everything. We had some nastiness in Brick Lane along with the National Front, because they used to stand at the top of the Brick Lane at the (on) Sundays. We the community took upon ourselves that they shouldn't be doing that. The young Asian boys at the time, including Ansar and (Rajonuddin) Jalal and all them, they were just young boys. We had held a big meeting in the Montefiore Centre. We had so many people attended the meeting, that we could (not) get all of them in the centre. It might have been 1978, there were lot of violence at that time. I got myself beaten up and arrested by the police. I was actually doing youth work at that time and I was [unclear] Montefiore Centre to say that these kids will come in Arabic class, so we decided to close the youth club and the police came, we sent the kids home. Then our kids they were the tough kids not to go home but they were all on the landings hiding, waiting for these kids, well they were not kids they were big teenagers at that time. They were mixed, youth club against the youth club basically. But the police got a bit heavy handed with our lot, because they were boys; the police marched right through where we were, instead of making them turn back and go where they came from, sort of agitated our kids on our estate, big fight broke out and then the police grabbed me and policeman dragged me down the street by my ponytail and I got arrested for breach of the peace. We did get real bad trouble with BNP and all that. I won't say they were National Fronts but they weren't nice kids. They were from the area of Bethnal Green basically. Which even to me Bethnal Green is alien; but it's different now, because even in Bethnal Green there are many Bengali families now, but then there was none.

..... Sometimes, like certain members would question me, "what are you doing", even today I still do everything, lot of my neighbours, if they get a form, they come to me, if they get a passport, they come to me. Sometimes it gets up my bloody nerves but it's the way I have been brought up really. And my family got used to that.

My parents never mind, even when I got arrested and I was young then. I got cousins who are Asians, half Asians.

We grew up with Uncle Louis, even before we met any Bengalis. I didn't really meet any Bengalis till I came to this little area. Then I met a man called Abdul Matin, he had a brother called Faruq, they run the grocery store at Blackline Yard[unclear of the name] which is very famous or was famous and don't exist anymore, that was a little hub for Bengali sweetshop and meat shop, just one little street, previously they were all Jews owners. There were a lot of Jews people round here in those days, the older generation of the Jews population.

..... My mum very often joined in opposing racism in the streets, I can remember coming out and shouting at kids that are coming to the area from outside to make trouble. So I did have lot of support. My parents were very multi-racial, my uncle was from Goa. He is my dad's sister's husband. He is my uncle by marriage, he married my dad's sister. Their children who were my first cousin. Looking at my cousins, they exactly looked like you. My mum's family was French. I guess they were Huguenots. But Huguenots were Protestants. But my mum was Catholic, I can't work that out!

..... I was in Bangladesh for a month or five weeks. We were 13 in number. We got £25 a head from the youth office and the rest we had to pay our selves. For me it was to go and learn about others, simple things I learned from it.

..... On our visit (to) Bangladesh, we had local councillors, school teachers, youth workers, and press officers from the Town Hall, our Bengali friends who were also in that group. We took a placard written "Brick Lane" to Bangladesh in 1980. We met Ziaur Rahman the president as well. We also took pictures with the soldiers with rifles when they greeted us.

..... We marched to Downing Street, it was raining. That was terrible, I never knew Altab Ali, I did know the kid who was involved in that murder. He got prison sentence for it. I knew it because he was from Tower Hamlets. My sister used to work in a children home at that time. That boy was from the children home. I didn't know the situation, but the poor man ended up dead and they killed him because of his wages. He was just going out on a Friday night from his job. That was a first horrible murder really, in that time.

..... The locals to be honest, majority of them were quite laid back, they just let things go on. Some of us were not so laid back and we stood up and we used to have vigils at Brick Lane. We stayed at Brick Lane every week end. The Nazrul restaurant used to be open for us to go and have a cup of tea all through the night. The owner of the restaurant was Mr. Ali. I was one of the vigilante team. I just stood up for my community, that's what I did. close as they were. I will personally blame it on to the Montefiore Centre being closed down in the height of its usefulness. We still had a long way to go, and as soon as the Liberals came to power, they closed our community centre. That was the end of it. Then I moved to Shahjalal Estate. I got job as a social worker in Underwood Road and I did that for ten years. Then I had a heart attack and gave up.

..... The teenagers, the kids are not the same, I do not expect them to be the same. Not only the Bengali kids, but in this area, they are mostly the Bengalis; there are nothing for them anymore. There are not many youth clubs nowadays. The kids of today are running gangs today and they fight one another and they kill one another. That's the sad thing about it.

..... They were not brave enough to come out and say to me that they were National Front. Some of the neighbours, we did have bad times around here, didn't like the Bengali family to come into their area. Like when a flat became empty, some local kids would go in there and smash the flat up.

I have even stayed in a Bengali house over night, where they threw bricks through the window. Because they didn't wanted a Bengali family to get that flat in Spring Walk.
..... I have got four sons and one daughter. But my middle son, if you didn't see him, you will think he was Bengali. He speaks fluent Bengali like it is his mother tongue. He grew up in Fakruddin Street and my kids were the only English speaking kids really. He did GCSE in Bengali. He will be 23 on the 24th of this month. He is talented and very clever. I am proud of him because he is my ears and my [unclear] for Bengali, it's like he was born Bengali. I can't have full conversation in Bengali as much as I would love to. My boy speaks more Bengali then he does English. I would say Bengali is his mother tongue.

..... The National Front, they did used to come just to trouble, just to hurt people. They just rampaged down Brick Lane and would put brick in someone's face. They owned a big building at Great Eastern Street, a massive ware house. There was a whole family in this estate in Greatorex Street who supported National Front. They were the Buttery family. They don't live here anymore.