

Remembering the 1970s

John Newbiggin



In January 1976 Mr. Newbiggin started working with Avenues Unlimited as a youth and community worker. He worked with Bengali youth in and around Brick Lane. Now he works as a freelance journalist and strategic consultant to the cultural industries.

..... In 1976, what is now the Bethnal Green City Technology College was then called Daneford School. There were about 60 or 70 Bengali boys at the school. I discovered that the way the school is dealing with racism in the school was to lock the Bengali boys in a classroom at break time to stop them being beaten up. So you can imagine what was happening was that round the doors and windows of the classroom where the White kids beating on the windows, spitting on the windows saying, "We will get you when you get out". There were kids who just arrived from Bangladesh, just weeks before. They had no idea what was going on, they were absolutely terrified. There was a very remarkable Pakistani teacher there called, Mushtaq Ahmed, who was really determined to try and get these kids in a state of mind that they could fight back. One of the things that I did quite early on was that I started some football teams. And we also started a kung-Fu club in St Hilda's (Community Centre) to begin the teaching of kids, self-defence. Because their inclination when they were being attacked by group of kids or challenged by group of White boys in the street, was to be polite, or to run away and they didn't have the confidence of the organisation to fight back. So lot of what we were doing at a very very simple level was beginning to built social organisations, as I said; football clubs, drama class, kung-Fu clubs, which then acquired a political dimension and particularly in 1978, Bangladesh Youth Movement, Bangladesh Youth Association, the Progressive Youth Organisation and a whole series of youth organisations grew up, that were entirely autonomous in the sense that they were managed, driven and run by the young people themselves. They had a social dimension, but they very rapidly acquired a political dimension, and they were very sophisticated political organisations. They were real community organisations and they were involved in helping to defend people when they were under attack, they were involved in lobbying the council because at that time Tower Hamlets Council really had almost no understanding of the incoming Bengali culture. And the way they thought you communicate to some Bangladeshi was that you shout at them in English, it was unbelievable how primitive the approach particularly the housing department was, because they were under great deal of strain. So in answer to your question, there were organisations beginning to emerge. They immersed very rapidly and had a very dynamic and positive effect in the community.

..... I remember seeing kids being beaten up in Brick Lane. It was certainly impossible to go into a pub away from the immediate area of Brick Lane without effectively getting involved in a fight. If a White man came with a Bengali man, people would shout, abuse and threaten you. It was very, very open. And particularly the summer of 1976 was bad and the summer of 1978 was going to the reach the climax. There was a good deal of open intimidation on the street, woman and children being shouted out, people having bricks put through their windows, shit put through their letter boxes, clothes drying on the line would be cut with razors, cars would be damaged, incredible level of violence

and the response of the police was absolutely pathetic. Very often the police did virtually nothing.

..... It was extraordinary how there had been a lot of violence and a lot of beating ups and somehow it's true that even at the time, it was felt that, that murder was just a kind of trigger for the community that people were just not going to take any more of this kind of intimidation. The demonstration came to gather very quickly, and it was the (Bangladesh) Welfare Association which was the main force at that time, but the youth organisations also were responsible for mobilizing the community very quickly. And it was a very big and very powerful demonstration and a very forceful demonstration. And I think, that in a way for the first time the East End physically went to the West End and that was may be the first time when a lot of national press journalist began to realise, that there was some real issues were going for the community here, and that it was becoming a big community and it was under real threat of violence. It was a very important moment.

..... I remember feeling very strongly at that time that people were almost, kind of, paralysed coming to the society, they didn't know the rules, the rules were not clear; how should you behave, how could you behave. And this man was saying, if I were in Bangladesh, I know exactly what I do to these kids. Be here I don't know what the consequences are. So I can't do anything, because I fear for the safety of my wife and children.

..... I think maybe Altab Ali murder was one of the triggers that began to change that consciousness.

..... That procession was special, in the other demonstrations there were very much the young active Black and White people in the community. My recollection of that march was that it involved a much broader section of the community. It really was the whole Bengali community were out on the street, and it was a very dignified, very solemn procession. It wasn't quite so obviously angry as some of the demonstrations that had taken place. It was a much bigger affair, I mean, I can't think of any particular sort of incident during the course of it. But I remember that it was a very dignified and in a kind of deep way very angry demonstration. But it felt like it was much more the whole community out there then the case before.