

Remembering the 1970s

Nooruddin Ahmed



Mr. Ahmed in the 1970s was a young political activist and the founding member of Bangladesh Youth League. He also worked for Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Justice (THARJ) and was one of the field officers responsible for monitoring the racial incidents in and around Brick Lane. Currently he is working for a community research organisation in East London.

..... I started to work for the community; it was after the Altab Ali's killing. It was a revolution among the Bengali people. We decided not to let them go without any protest. Mr. Ahmed in the 1970s was a young political activist and the founding member of Bangladesh Youth League. He also worked for Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Justice (THARJ) and was one of the field officers responsible for monitoring the racial incidents in and around Brick Lane. Currently he is working for a community research organisation in East London.

..... I used to work in a restaurant, obviously we had very little time to interact with the host community people; we were just doing our own thing and they were doing their own (thing) and living their own life. So the death of Altab Ali was a shock to everyone, which was absolutely unimaginable. Obviously the small incidents happened every now and then. But some-one being murdered purely because he was (of a) different colour was totally (unacceptable). So there was a tremendous sense of shock, we felt it; then community organised meetings and demonstrations, all were just spontaneous there was nothing pre-planned. A murder happened, it was terribly shocking, people organised the demonstrations, and it was a very big demonstration, huge demonstration. It started from the Altab Ali Park, which used to be known as St. Mary's Garden or something. The demonstration ended up in Hyde Park. It was a big, well organised, and well disciplined and people responded to it very spontaneously. Obviously it was not just Bangladeshis or Bengalis. Bengalis were at the forefront as they were the victims, but they were supported by the progressive forces in this country like, Anti-Nazi League, people in labour movement, Socialist Workers Party and others.

..... And in this demonstration were not just people from East London or from Tower Hamlets; (they were there) from all over East London, everybody came and people from other parts of London came as well. Some people spent not (just) hours, even the whole day; some people (even) spent the night just to be around here. There was a time we needed to patrol the properties. National Front on one hand wanted to occupy Brick Lane to say that "Yes, we have taken the heart...of the Bangladeshis away from them". And the Bangladeshis felt "Not here, (not) Brick Lane, we have to protect (it)".

..... we found other Bangladeshis were being attacked. We went to defend those Bangladeshi families and we were attacked, especially Jalal and myself were attacked quite severely. I needed to go to the hospital because I had received a blow on my head. Some of the housing estates used to be no- go area, especially in the other side of Commercial Road, Teviot Estate, Lincoln's Estate, Glamis Estate, there was a place in Stepney Green used to be no go areas for Bangladeshis.

..... When I came in 1969, I didn't know what was the number of Bangladeshis here, it was very small community. Still you can feel it was a predominant Jewish community, though they started moving (out) by 1969 in larger numbers; but lots of factories, tailoring factories, shops were owned by the Jewish people.

Some were owned by Pakistanis and, some by Turkish as well. So there were not many Bangladeshi owned factories or shops but Bangladeshis were working in factories. And it was mainly the men, until after the liberation (of Bangladesh); you could count number of families on your hands, very small. In terms of facilities, people would have been sharing, sharing rooms, or a flat, sharing food and sharing houses. Lots of houses wouldn't have television, people will go there and it was a routine thing, from Monday to Friday and sometime on Saturdays people will work overtime then there was no bath inside the house. People will go to public bath, have their bath and for men it have been a routine thing to go to watch television on Saturday, watching wrestling on television. It was one of the most popular programmes for elderly or middle aged man. That was what their routine entertainment. That's how it was. Nowadays Brick Lane is completely different, now you have a Brick Lane where thousands of people are coming and the population has grown. Brick Lane caters food for wide range of people from outside. But at that time Brick Lane was catering in terms of employment it was catering for Bangladeshis, in terms of shops and other facilities. I think there was lots of solidarity as well. Where as now community has grown, people have (other) responsibilities, family has grown, and they have their own responsibilities. Right after 1971, the community was quite relatively small. In 1970 people started to move in quite large number into this area. And there were two major factors, one was up in the North, factories were closing so people started to come here in East London for employment. On the other hand in 1971, there was the liberation war in Bangladesh, so people was fleeing Bangladesh and they didn't find employment in the North so they started coming here. So it became overcrowded at some point. Because people had the solidarity, people put up with extra people in their house and somehow managed.