

Remembering the 1970s

Rajonuddin Jalal



Mr. 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. Currently, he works as a Manager for Havering Council.

..... In the past going back to the early 70s and so on people who came to this country were single men, or single men who brought their sons over to make a contribution to the industry here. They never thought that they were going to settle here. Even during the anti-racist struggle in 1978, there were many people who were saying, "Should we really be doing this, should we really be fighting against the National Front, because this is not our home", and so the murder of Altab Ali, gave us a voice and also it gave us the confidence to claim Brick Lane or Tower Hamlets as our home. Because in the past people would have always thought about going back and not thinking of Tower Hamlets as our home. But the murder of Altab Ali changed that. When thousands of people came out on to the street, people recognised that our future was here. So that was a turning point for us, the whole community. And hence the slogans that I mentioned to you, it was a slogan from the young people, very young people aged 16 plus. 'Here to stay, here to fight'. That was against the back ground, that the older people said "should we be doing that, this is not our home". So that's how I would analyse the significance of the murder of Altab Ali.

..... It was a very emotional event, thousands of People came out. Never before did the Bengalis come out in such numbers. Emotional in the sense that the event was not organised by the people, who were professional in the political field. It was a spontaneous community response to a happening. It was raining heavily that day, and still you had about ten thousand people marching from Whitechapel, Altab Ali Park, from the corner of Brick Lane through to Hyde Park corner via the House of Commons and back again.

..... That was the day when the Bengali people felt that, we were no longer to be treated as immigrants.

..... I was attacked by a gang of white youth, for no reason at all, and then going back in 1978; the size of the community was not very big, and it was that evening, late Caroline Adams, a youth worker went to my rescue. That was my own experience. I also had involvement in supporting people who were victims of attacks. We used to live in a place called The Hostel, Number 7, the Crescent Minories near the Tower of London. A group of single man used to live there including myself and there is a chap called Terry Fitzpatrick, Irish himself, and a great supporter of the Bengali community. Whenever Bengalis were under attack he would go and pick us up. A small number of young people who used to live in that hostel, we would come with him in a van and we will go support people who were victims of racial attacks.

..... There were many occasions when the thugs belonging to the National Front will (would) be rampaging through places like Brick Lane and Cannon Street Road, and we would organise groups of young people to go and physically fight with them. There have been many battle that involved physical assaults between the National Front and us, and eventually we did drive them out of the area. It was a battle for survival.

..... The battle of 78 was definitely worth it, because we had to defeat the racist. So there is no question about whether the battle of Brick Lane was successful. It was definitely successful, what we have done historically is significant, important and it's definitely a landmark for our community.

The facts that exclude a section of the community in other words the poorer sections of the community can no longer afford to stay in places like Brick Lane, is worrying, but the city is encroaching further to the east of London with Canary Wharf and other development having taken place in Isle of Dogs. I am afraid people are being pushed out of the area.

..... If you go back to 1978, there were no-go areas for Bengalis. The Bethnal Green side of Brick Lane, from the bridge and beyond, bordering with the Truman Brewery, it was a no-go area for the Bengalis. There were many parts of Tower Hamlets, which were no-go areas for Bengalis. Bethnal Green is one of them, Poplar is another, Isle of Dogs is definitely another. These are areas Bengalis couldn't venture into. In 1978 the Bengalis who might have been offered re-housing, in areas like Poplar, Isle of Dogs, and even Wapping not so far from Cannon Street Road, which is the heart of the Bengali community. Bengalis would not accept housing there, because of the fear of racial attacks. The situation has now changed. I think there are no no-go areas remaining in Tower Hamlets. Bengalis can go to any area of Tower Hamlets and live there without the fear of being attacked.

..... I think many of the people, who fought during 1978 and sacrificed a lot personally, because the people who participated in the battle for Brick Lane sacrificed a lot by giving up employment, not being able to take on educational opportunities are definitely role model. In a western society, it is very difficult to find people who are willing to sacrifice their material gains and educational achievements for the sake of defending a community. Many of the people, who fought in the battle for Brick Lane, are definitely role models for our younger generation. But the younger generation can do even better. They have the opportunity that we did not have that back in 1978.