

Remembering the 1970s

Suroth Ahmed (Faruk)



Mr Ahmed (Faruk) was one of the founding members of Bangladesh Youth Approach (BYA). He was the fourth resident of Toc H and helped many Bengali families in East End from racial attack.

..... 1972, Bengali people used to avoid the Wapping area because of fear. Most people were afraid of Bethnal Green. Today I live in Ingram House, this was an area marked for enmity to Bengalis. People were unable to go to Wapping even for work. Some parts of Ingram House were marked as no go area to the Bengali people.

..... I went to another factory and they denied me and they were even laughing at me. We took it normally, because we were taught by our elders and predecessor to take it normally. We had nothing to say, and our experienced persons use to teach us how to avoid the harassment, and how to be safe, by being indoor by 6:00 pm and using the streets less used by the White people.

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..... I came to Britain suddenly, but I was a student back in Bangladesh. I wanted to study again, here in Britain. Chunnu and Fokor alias Billy were my neighbours and they were cousins. They were fluent in English. I was of their age but was unable to speak good enough English to talk to them. Chunnu told me about the Myrdle Street School, if I was interested to learn English; he wanted to take me to the school. Then I went to the school and met Barrister Shah Lutfur Rahman, who was a teacher of that school. I got admitted to his class. He was the teacher of the elementary class at that time, I went to the class and he assessed me for half an hour. Then he decided to admit me to the next class. An English woman was the teacher and I attended the class for only two or three days. Unfortunately, my local (London) guardian, who was a relative of mine, was totally against the idea of learning English and going to school. His ideology was, "we have come here to work, we should work, and we don't need to become barristers". He also suspected, "you are going to the night school now, soon you will be going to night club". So I was thinking of changing my living place because I was not satisfied with the restriction.

..... I got the chance to be the fourth resident of the hostel. Mr Jamal Hasan, Mr Aklas Uddin and Mr Moin Uddin were there before me and I was the fourth to be admitted there. It was a different environment and different place; it was a very big house.

..... Then I met Mr Babul, who came to England from Bangladesh on a bicycle. Jamal Hasan also came to Britain on a bicycle. They were studying in that time in Britain. They and Peter East encouraged me very much.

..... Peter East, Chunnu, Abbas, Jalal Uddin (Rajonuddin Jalal), Syed Nurul Islam and some other people including me, were organised for community development. The Bangladesh Youth Movement and Bangladesh Youth Approach were not established yet and we had problems with racism. We thought that the racism was a natural phenomenon, we were learning to put up with this. We were unable to communicate with them, and we were just making (Bengali) groups to be safe when we use to go to distance places.

..... I went to two factories to learn the tailoring job. There were no shortage of jobs but we were unable to get jobs, because we did not know the language. At the beginning, I came to know about a factory and went there for work; they denied me saying, "We don't employ Black people".

..... Let us come back to the hostel; when the hostel was opening, the then High Commissioner Sultan Ahmed and Peter Shore (MP) were the patron of the hostel during its opening. We used to have an annual party in that hostel and the High Commission of Bangladesh and Peter Shore were always invited and attended the party. We became organised during our hostel life, and we were committed to support the helpless Bengali people who had no hope against the racial violence. Shah Lutfur Rahman, Peter East and Caroline Adams were the brain behind the youth organisation and movement. They inspired us to become organised and help the Bengali people who came under racial attacks. They were leading us and I can remember one incident of helping a family who were newcomer to Britain. They were accommodated in Bethnal Green in a council flat on the first floor. They were unable to stay there for more than one day, the racists attacked them and broke all the windows of the flat. The next day we the youth from the hostel went to their rescue. We helped them to move all their household belongings. Shah Lutfur Rahman and Peter Shore were leading us by providing information and advising us what to do.

..... We had travelled a lot at that time and we met different types of people. Not all the people in a country can be racist; there are always good and bad people. In 1975, we went to Lake District for two weeks, the district was a completely unexposed one, and they had never seen an Asian. There was no train communication. We can never forget the experience. We had a video camera at that time and we had some of the scenario recorded. It was a hilly area with lakes. It was a beautiful place. Our experience was with the White youths; they loved us so much and we liked them so much that when we were coming back, they were all crying like the Bengali people crying in the marriages or for their dead relatives, we were all crying. The White people showed us huge respect and loved us so much. It was a big area and all the people of all ages used to come to our camp early in the morning. Jalal gave the introductory speech and they all were so pleased and they received us warmly. It was a very pleasant experience. We were in contact for many years after we came back. Later the communication broke down slowly, because of the distance. Thus we find the warm hearted White people. Peter East and John used to arrange the trips. John was not involved as much as Peter East but he was a nice gentleman.

..... The racists didn't need provocation; I can remember an incident, Syed Nurul Islam and I went to enjoy the second film of Bruce Lee, 'Enter the Dragon'; we went to the Warner Cinema in Leicester Square. We were living in the hostel at Tower Bridge, at that time. We went to enjoy the cinema and after the show we were coming back to the hostel. When we were returning to our hostel, we reached the underground rail station of the then Charing Cross station. We saw a few middle aged, rough white people; we felt that they were not good people. We watched them and got in another compartment just to avoid them. When we sat in that compartment, they came to the compartment and start beating us in front of the crowd in that compartment. I was unable to understand what was going on, but Syed Nurul Islam protested. When he stood to defend, they caught him and took him to the door of the compartment and started beating him. Then I stood and protested, I was asking them what the problem was. One white gentleman tried to protest, but his wife stopped him and I was sure if he had protested, he would have been attacked too. They threw Nurul Islam on the floor, and beat him. I asked them, what our fault was. They told us nothing but left us soon.

..... To me the progress of our Bengali community is huge. I am very happy that the right people are now representing the community in nearly every sector, including music.

.....Before Altab Ali's murder, another incident took place in Southall, where an Indian was killed and we had a huge demonstration protesting the killing. That was my first participation. We printed and distributed leaflets in protest of the killing; the protest was organised from the Youth Hostel.....

.....When Altab Ali was killed, we from the Youth Hostel were mainly behind the protest and the demonstration. Jamal Hasan and some other people must be credited for the demonstration. We the people in the hostel worked all the night writing the posters and leaflets. That was a huge demonstration. We had Mr Tareq Ali, Mr Faruque Dhondy and Mala Dhondy with us at that time. Another Indian person was involved.....

.....The killing of Altab Ali gave the voice to the Bengali people that; we are here to stay and to live. We can no longer tolerate racism and such kind of brutal activity. It was the beginning of the progression of the community. The (Bangladesh) Youth Movement and youth centre was formed and all the members of the community were fully and actively supporting the activities. Many people had a mind set, that we are here to earn and go back to Bangladesh but the mind set was changed after Altab Ali's killing. We decided to establish ourselves in Britain. Many of the young people went to learn the Kung Fu for self defence, many were not successful, but many were successful to learn the art.....

.....After Altab Ali's murder and the demonstrations, we got huge response from all works of the society. We were soon able to start many organisations like the Nazrul Academy and such institutions and the result is obvious now.....

.....I came to Britain in 1972, to my observation we had the mindset that, we the Asian and the Bengali people don't have the right to be here. We are here only to work, not to demand any rights of our own. We have to hide ourselves from the White racist, we have to be indoor after sunset, and we have to group together to be safe. And that is all, we can do.....

.....But after the killing of Altab Ali, the scenario was completely different; we realised our dignity and our right in the society. We knew our blood was not that worthless. We had to fight for our rights and our dignity. To my opinion, Altab Ali's killing made us realise our value for the first time.....

.....We never expected such huge number of people would come out to protest the killing. We had no previous experience of such a big gathering. It was a very successfully arranged demonstration and the people were as if awakened. And I believe we never ever were unconscious of our rights after that. The Bengali community developed after that incident day by day.....

.....We were very happy that we had realized our own identity and value. I can't describe the feeling, it was like the people were sleeping, unaware of their rights and dignity, suddenly something woke them all; they begin to realise their power of unity and so on.....

.....We realized, we can protest, we can be united and we have nothing to fear from the police or other people. In the past we always feared the police, I can remember one incident of harassment by the police. It happened in Myrdle Street, Syed Nurul Islam was driving and he parked the car on the side of the road. It was not illegal parking. Still the police charged him, I was not on the spot but I saw and I came. The police told me to bring my wallet, and I did not understand him. He pushed me and assaulted me, which is beyond imagination nowadays. He used slang on me I was so hurt.

Today we can protest and demand justice, but in those days we couldn't do anything. Another incident took place in the Youth Hostel; I forgot to bring the key, I went out for something, when I came back there were nobody in the house. We had a window open in the kitchen for these types of emergency. I entered the house through the window; all of a sudden one undercover police officer followed me and came to the house. He rang the bell and I opened the door. He asked me about my identity and I showed him my room and he saw my photograph but he accused me of being illegal. He then ordered me to see him at the police station every month. I denied. He was adamant, but I also protested and afterwards his colleague stopped him from being aggressive. This sort of behaviour is not possible nowadays. He even tried to arrest me.....