

Altab Ali and the 'Battle of Brick Lane'

Jamal Hasan



Jamal Hasan was a leading anti-racist activist in the East End of London in the 1970s. He was the General Secretary of the Action Committee Against Racial Attacks which was formed to organise the National Demonstration following the death of Altab Ali.

Unlike the 'Battle of Cable Street' which was fought and won on the same day (4th October 1936), the 'Battle of Brick Lane' lasted nearly a decade. It came to a climax on 4th May 1978 when Altab Ali, a young Bangladeshi, was brutally murdered by racist thugs; a tragic event which sparked the beginning of the end for the 'Battle of Brick Lane'.

Historically, because of the East India Dock, East London had been a popular spot for the immigrants to enter the UK and many settled in the area due to its closeness to the city and few moved elsewhere in the UK. This concentration of immigrant communities attracted the attention of racists and the fascists thriving in East London and the area has a long history of racism and fascism.

The appearance and the character of the racist thugs changed over the decades. In 1930s Mosely's Hitler-styled uniformed thugs known as the '**Black Shirts**' had tried to get rid of the Jewish community from the UK; smartly dressed 'Teddy Boys' in the late 50s and early 60s wanted to keep '**Keep Britain White**' and called for the repatriation of African-Caribbean communities; and in the 70s, the '**Skin Heads**' terrorized Asians with their '**Paki-Bashing**' practices. Prior to the early 70s Asians had not been widely subjected to racial attacks and when we started to experience racial harassment and became victims of such attacks, we were not capable of defending ourselves (in contrast to Jewish and African-Caribbean communities). We played the role of silent victims. The anti-racists from all over London used to assemble in Brick Lane every Sunday to oppose the National Front's presence. We praised their stance but were scared to join them to fight the NF thugs.

From early 70s until 1978 racial tensions in Brick Lane and the surrounding areas, where the Bangladeshis mostly lived, were ever increasing. London's famous 'Petticoat Lane Sunday Market' had always drawn crowds from all over London. The racist National Front (NF) had their HQ close to Brick Lane and every Sunday they used to run a stall on the corner of Bethnal Green Road and Brick Lane from which they used to distribute their filthy racist propaganda materials and recruit new members. The NF started to incite their members to harass and use physical violence against Asians. For example, the racists would eat in the Asian restaurants in Brick Lane but would not pay the bills and would vandalize the establishments before leaving. The police turned a blind eye and did nothing to protect Asian businessmen. Physical attacks on Asians were on the increase every day. Gradually these '**Paki-Bashing**' activities were no longer limited to Sundays, but became a daily practice by the NF who started visiting Brick Lane and the surrounding areas regularly. Subsequently the harassment was extended to the neighboring areas.

We were scared to go out alone. Our movements were limited to three essential destinations: home, workplace and shops. It was like living under curfew and no place was safe. Even in our own homes we lived in fear of flying bottles and bricks breaking our windows and landing in our living rooms. Occasionally during the night NF thugs would pour petrol through letter boxes and set it alight. It was no good reporting this harassment to the police because they refused to take any action until we could provide them with the names and the addresses of the perpetrators.

Racial tensions were so high that we constantly feared for our lives. There had already been a few murders in neighboring areas. We knew about the Notting Hill race riots in the late 50s and had always hoped that we would be spared a race riot such as had happened more recently in Southall (1976). The youths in East London were, however, enormously inspired by the decision of the Asian youth in Southall to fight the racists and earn self-respect. While a section of the Asian elders were considering returning to Bangladesh for safety, the youths were gearing up to show their strength and defend the community from racial attacks. A number of youth groups emerged in various parts of East London. Some youths decided to form vigilante groups to defend the community in the absence of police protection. It became a ritual to assemble in the middle of Brick Lane every Sunday (in front of the Naaz Cinema Hall) and march to the end of Brick Lane to face the NF supporters. One such Sunday the TUC General Secretary Mr Len Murray joined us at the corner of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road. Mr Murray criticised the police and their handling of National Front activity in the Brick Lane area calling for them to do more to protect Bangladeshis in East London. He also resolutely condemned the views of the National Front. Consequently the authorities began to take notice of the situation in Brick Lane and a temporary police station was established in the middle of Brick Lane. Unfortunately, this did not stop racist attacks on us. On the contrary, the increased Police presence actually resulted in increased arrests of Asian youths under 'Stop and Search' tactics which reached intolerable levels during the period.

The Murder of Altab Ali

After years of continuous struggle fighting against racism and fascism seemingly without success, at the very moment when the anti-racist movement was running out of steam and was beginning to doubt the prospect of winning the battle, Altab Ali, a young Bangladeshi factory worker, was murdered by the fascists on 4 May 1978. Although we had constantly feared such a fatal incident, the community was shocked and news of Altab Ali's death spread throughout East London with lightning speed. Everybody, men and women, young and old, took to the streets instantly, resolved to win the battle against the NF once and for all. We were determined to succeed and Asian people all over the UK found a new source of courage for the resistance movement. It was Altab Ali's death which turned the tide in the 'Battle of Brick Lane'. For this reason the Battle of Brick Lane and Altab Ali are so closely linked that we cannot separate one from the other.

As a consequence, the elders who had hitherto been shy of doing anything to stop racist attacks changed their attitude and vowed to combat racism. Spontaneously, everybody assembled in Brick Lane and started to work out what to do. The community leaders were divided and three distinct groups began to emerge, each planning to organise its own demonstration in response to the murder. The youths on the other hand opposed divisions and saw the importance of united action. In this way they acted boldly to force the community leaders to form one united Action Committee. The ruling Bangladesh Welfare Association (BWA) agreed to Terry Fitzpatrick's proposal that Mr Taibur Rahman, the leader of the other faction of the BWA, be accepted as the president of the Action Committee so that the divided community could be united under one banner. Because I was an active member of the ruling factions of the BWA and also belonged to both the youth and older groups I was given the privilege to serve as the General Secretary of the Action Committee. A 17 member Action Committee was formed called 'Action Committee against Racial Attacks' (ACARA) with the sole purpose of organising a national demonstration. ACARA included a number of non-Asian members who had been active in the anti racist activities in Brick Lane at that time. Thus, the death of Altab Ali brought the most important change in that it united the divided community and made us determined to stop further racist attacks against Asians.

The National Demonstration

37 years ago there was no social media, no mobile telephones, fax machines, or other easy ways of communicating. Nevertheless, miraculously all Asians and anti-racist people throughout the UK became aware of the national demonstrations in response to the murder of Altab Ali and spontaneously large numbers decided to take part as a mark of solidarity and strength to stamp out racist attacks throughout the country. I had always been active in politics since I was a student in Bangladesh and had expertise in writing banners and leaflets. Most of my time was therefore spent writing leaflets and posters and, with the help of an army of volunteers, distributing them locally and nationally. Because so many people wanted to take part spontaneously it was possible to organise a successful national demonstration with only a few days preparation. Organisations from all over the UK sent representatives and Asian organisations from outside London sent truckloads of their members to attend the demonstration. We started our demonstration from Brick Lane by carrying Altab Ali's coffin in front of us. Our slogans made a thunderous noise which shook the city. The first stop was Hyde Park where we had a huge rally and we finally ended in Downing Street to give our petition to the Prime Minister.

Altab Ali Park

Throughout the preparations for the National Demonstration, I was excited to see the united community working together to overcome all obstacles in its way. I was concerned, however, that this attitude may not last for long and that the teaching of Altab Ali was in danger of being forgotten in the future. I wanted to harness this wave of enthusiasm and was determined to ensure that after the demonstration everything should not be over. So I started playing with the idea of establishing a permanent event so that we could commemorate this turning point in years to come. I began to plan a Carnival Against Racism which would be held at the disused graveyard, known as St. Mary's Park, near the spot Altab Ali was murdered and discussed this idea with a few people. Caroline Adams and John Newbegin from Avenues Unlimited, Ravi Jain, the president of the National Association of Indian Youth, and Cathy Peters (now Cathy Foresters) encouraged me to go ahead with the project. I did not waste any time and on the same day the National Demonstration was over I started contacting various bands to perform at the carnival. At that time Punjabi Bhangra Dance was becoming popular in the UK and Ravi Jain correctly assured me that a Bhangra group would be the highlight of the carnival. With the help of other friends I managed to get enough groups to perform, but we were still missing a local Bangladeshi group. I had contacts with Bangladeshi cultural groups from West and South London, but I thought it would be the best to have a local East London group to perform in the carnival. One day Jalal took me to Salique's place and told me that Salique had a cultural group in East London. The group was called Dishari Shilpi Goshti. They had only very recently formed and had never performed in public. However, instead of being nervous, Salique was excited and sent someone to get the group members to start rehearsing immediately. Cathy helped me to obtain a generous grant from Tower Hamlets Council and I must mention here Paul Beasley, leader of the council, who, besides the generous cash grant, provided us with all essential facilities for a public gathering. I took the opportunity to begin referring to the venue of the carnival as the 'ALTAB ALI PARK' instead of St Mary's Park. Subsequently, many years after we appropriated the name 'Altab Ali Park', the council officially renamed the park as such in 1998.

Conclusion

Nowadays it is hard to imagine the horrifying conditions that we faced from the early 1970s until the death of Altab Ali. It is only through his ultimate sacrifice that we have now security, respect and dignity in the UK society. Today, the Bangladeshi community is doing surprisingly better in all walks of life. In education, business, politics and media, we prosper as other communities in the UK. However, it is sadly noticeable that from time to time we forget the most important lesson the murder of Altab Ali taught us: that without unity we cannot achieve anything. Just remembering Altab Ali once a year on 4th May is not enough; we must remember this lesson 365 days of the year.