

## **1978: The turning point of Bengali politics in London's East End**

### **Ansar Ahmed Ullah**



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The Bengali presence in the UK can be traced back long before the Indian subcontinent gained its independence in 1947. From mid-19th century onwards small number of Asian professionals, mainly doctors, businessmen and lawyers had established themselves in Britain.

In the beginning of the 20th century the first large group of South Asians who came to the UK were seamen, known as *lascars*, including Bengali-seamen recruited in British India to work for the East India Company. Groups of seamen and ex-soldiers settled nearer the docks of East End of London.

### **The 1940s-1950s: Welfare of fellow countrymen**

Some of these seamen began to settle in London's East End from the 1850s onwards. Evidence of the early settlement of Bengali seamen in London can be seen in the formation of organisations such as the Society for the Protection of Asian Sailors in 1857.

But an early and influential Bengali figure connected to the East End of London was Ayub Ali Master, who lived at 13 Sandy's Row (1945-59). He ran a seamen's café in Commercial Road in the 1920s and also then opened the Shah Jalal Coffee House at 76 Commercial Street. The Commercial Street premise is still there now as a trendy bar/restaurant known as Blessings. Ayub Ali Master turned his Sandy's Row home into an advice centre of support for Bengalis which included a lodging house, a job centre offering letter writing, form filling and a travel agency. He also started the Indian Seamen's Welfare League in 1943. As a result most seamen headed for Ayub Ali Master's coffee shop which was usually the first port of call for help and guidance.

By the 1950s the Bengali population gradually grew and mostly men, both seamen and others who arrived in the UK by ship and by air, had established the Pakistan Welfare Association which became the Bangladesh Welfare Association after Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971. The Bangladesh Welfare Association is the oldest and largest community organisation with a membership of over 40,000. The Bangladesh Welfare Association building since 1965 is situated at 39 Fournier Street, next to historical Brick Lane Mosque, originally built for the minister of the church in 1750. It was the base of Huguenot charitable work with the local poor. Jewish charities were based here at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Until recently the Bangladesh Welfare Association building also happened to be the contact address for the Altab Ali Foundation.

## **1960s-1970s: Bangladeshi politics - Liberation War**

From early 1950s, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s political developments in Pakistan and especially in East Pakistan, where Bengalis came from, were moving fast. Pakistanis were campaigning against military rule. In addition the Bengalis of East Pakistan felt that they were getting a raw deal within the framework of Pakistan. As result resentment grow against the Pakistani ruling elite based in West Pakistan. The cause of the people of East Pakistan was being championed by a party called the Awami League led by a young charismatic leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Awami League's demand for self autonomy soon turned into full fledged Independence War of Bangladesh in 1971.

During the War of Bangladesh in 1971, the UK's Bengali community played an important role in highlighting the atrocities taking place in Bangladesh, lobbying British government & the international community and raising funds for refugees & Bengali freedom fighters. Bengali community across the UK formed Action Committee's in support of the liberation of Bangladesh. A key feature of this period was the support provided by members of the white British majority. Among some of them was our very own Peter Shore MP from East London.

It is interesting to note that Bengalis were active in political activity before 1971 as they had supported Awami League's Six Point programme in 1966, which demanded greater autonomy for East Pakistan and campaigned for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's release following his arrested in 1968 in the Agartala conspiracy case.

An important meeting venue during 1971 for the Bengali activists was the Dilchad restaurant near Artillery Lane in East London. The owner of the restaurant Mr Mottalib Chowdhury was a prominent social worker. There was hardly any Bengali student who did not receive help from him. His sons followed their father's foot step and still are active in community and social work.

## **1978: The Turning Point - Political mobilisation of the second generation Bengali community activists and anti-racist politics**

From the mid 1970s many British Asians, including Bengalis who lived in the East End of London, were experiencing racism, social deprivation and high level of unemployment. For the Brick Lane Bengali community, who were under constant attack from the racists since early 1970s, the murder of Altab Ali, a leather factory worker, in 1978 was a turning point, especially of its youth. It led to their mobilising and politicisation on an unprecedented scale. On 14 May 1978, 10,000 locals marched from the then St Mary's Garden now Altab Ali Park to a rally in Hyde Park and then to 10 Downing Street, to hand over a petition to the Prime Minister to take action against racist attacks, behind the coffin of Altab Ali in a show of unity and strength against racial violence. This was one of the biggest demonstrations by the Bengali community since the rallies for the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. In the same period the Bengali community began to

organise youth groups, community and campaigning groups and linked up with other anti-racist movements and organisations. The groups that came out of this struggle were the Bangladesh Youth Movement (BYM), Bangladesh Youth Front (BYF), Progressive Youth Organisation (PYO), Bangladesh Youth League (BYL) and the Bangladesh Youth Association (BYA) amongst others. In fact 1978 saw the emergence of the second generation of Bengali community activists who would later enter mainstream politics in the 1980s.

### **Naming of Altab Ali Park & Altab Ali Arch**

Altab Ali Park has now become symbolic to the Bengali community. To mark the death anniversary, Altab Ali Foundation was set up in 2010 to hold annual vigil on 4 May 2010 known as the Altab Ali Day. Usually hundreds of community leaders, activists and anti-racist activists attend in solidarity against racism and extremism in the East End.

After a long standing demand from the local community, St Mary's Garden was renamed Altab Ali Park, in 1998, an initiative brought forward by the Stepney Neighbourhood of Tower Hamlets Council to commemorate the racist murder of Altab Ali. Before that it was called St Mary's, the site of a 14<sup>th</sup> Century white church called St Mary's Matfelon from which the local area – Whitechapel-derived its name. It was bombed in the Blitz during World War II, and a lightning strike a few years later finished it off, only a few graves stones remain today.

As you enter Altab Ali Park, from White Church Lane/Whitechapel High Street you will pass under the Altab Ali Arch. This Arch commemorates Altab Ali and other victims of racist violence. In 1989, David Peterson, a Welsh artist and blacksmith was commissioned by Tower Hamlets to make a wrought iron arch for the entrance of the park. The design is based on both Bengali and European architecture. It comprises of red coated metal wrapped around and interwoven through a tubular structure. This is meant to signify the merging of different cultures in the East End.

Altab Ali Arch was erected on 25 – 27 September and unveiled on 1 October. A ceremony accompanied the unveiling in which there were speakers, Bengali Music and stalls. A banner was commissioned from Cate Clarke which was hung from two trees facing Whitechapel Road. Hundred children from local primary schools, Osmani and Harry Gosling made hats, flags, ribbon accessories and led procession through the arch after it was unveiled.

## **1980s: Community Representations**

From the 1970s-1980s Bengali community politics moved away from preoccupations with political struggles in Bangladesh. Alliances were forged between some of the first generation and the younger activists. The energy of youth was consolidated by the formation of Federation Bangladeshi Youth Organisations (FBYO), an umbrella body, in 1980 that spearheaded campaigns for better housing, health and education and against racism. The FBYO was the first truly national campaigning organisation that made representation of Bengali interests and spoke for Bengalis across the borough and nationally.

The youth seized the opportunity to gain both access to the local political system and to various funding streams channelled through the local council, the greater London authority and the education authority. They also saw the importance of building alliances with activists outside the Bengali community, such as other 'Asians' from Hackney, Newham, Camden, Southall, Bradford and those from the white majority community of East End.

In the 1980s 34 of the 112 community groups listed by local education authority were led by Bengalis in Spitalfields ward of Tower Hamlets. As Bengali community activism grew, many activists took prominent roles in community politics. Brick Lane became the centre of Bengali activism. Today Brick Lane has become a global icon, a branding concept as in 'Banglatown' and the 'Curry Capital of Europe'.

1982 saw first Bengalis elected to local council. Nurul Haque, an independent candidate from Spitalfields became a councillor defeating a Labour candidate. In the same year Labour's only Bengali candidate Ashik Ali became a councillor from St Katherine's ward. Today Tower Hamlets Council can boast the largest number of Black/Asian/Bengali councillors in any one borough. Today's Mayor, Member of Greater London Authority, Member of Parliament and Member of Lord are all directly linked to the legacy of the community's effort, following the murder of Altab Ali, to challenge institutional racism and to enter mainstream politics to bring about meaningful changes for the greater welfare of the Bengali community.