The Together Alliance against Racism, Fascism and Islamophobia

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In the 1970s, Jalal emerged as the leading youth activist in East London. He was the founding Secretary of the Altab Ali Foundation and is currently a prominent anti-racist campaigner.

"THE BATTLE OF CABLE STREET IN 1936" AND "THE BATTLE OF BRICK LANE IN 1978" AND THE COMMUNITY RESISTANCE MOVEMENT GOES ON!

In the East End of London, we have the unique co-existence of wealth in the form of the city of London -the richest square mile in the country, extreme poverty and the best examples of community diversity. Racism and fascism have been an everyday experience for thousands of Jewish refugees and migrants who escaped persecution. The history of British colonialism and imperialism also created a relationship with the exploited countries in the developing world, whose workers were attracted to the UK to take part in rebuilding the country after the devastation of the Second World War. Many migrant workers who arrived here ended up living in deprived inner-city areas across the country and were sharing resources with white working-class people. One such inner-city area is the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in the East End of London. This is where the migrant workers shared a life of poverty, shaped by low paid jobs that nobody else wanted to do, overcrowded housing and homelessness. They lacked educational opportunities, public healthcare and other welfare services. Yet, the local white working-class people were blaming the arrival of migrant workers as the cause of all their problems, instead of challenging the elite and the rich who controlled resources, distribution of wealth and power. The level of racism and fascism directed at the migrant communities can be traced in the historical evidence of life in these inner-city areas. For example, public houses used to have signs on their doors and windows stating, "No Jews, Irish, Pakis, Blacks and Dogs welcome"!

In the 1930s the primary targets of the racist and fascist forces were the Jewish people, who used to work in textiles, garments and weaving sweatshops in the East End. They were politically scapegoated, physically attacked or murdered by the British Union of Fascists (BUF) led by Oswald Mosley, who maybe the historical equivalent of Nigel Farage. Mosley's Black Shirt thugs were not content with terrorising the Jewish community with violence but wanted to drive them out of the area surrounding Cable Street, London, E1. This is where most local people, trade unionists and progressives came together in the form a community resistance movement against racism and fascism and declared that "They shall not pass". This movement eventually defeated the fascists, and the local community declared victory through the Battle of Cable Street on 4th October 1936.However, the elitist political and economic structures remained in place and thrived. The root causes of division and inequality continue to the present day.

In the 1960s, the far right in British politics found a new champion in Tory MP Enoch Powell, who declared his opposition to the migrant workers from the newly created commonwealth countries and declared that there shall be "rivers foaming of blood" in his inflammatory speech of 1968**,** against the arrival of migrants. This was a direct provocation of racial hatred against visible Asian and Black migrants. But the establishment took no action in explaining that the initiative was linked to the economic prosperity of the country following the labour shortages in the UK, especially after the Second World War. They remained silent on the racism perpetuated by the right-wing, because it suited their capitalist economic purpose.

The consequence of Enoch Powell's racist speech was the starting of the "Paki-bashing" phase, which resulted in the increase of violence against Asian communities across the country. By the 1970s, the National Front, a fascist party, had been established, led by notorious Martin Webster and Jon Tyndall(apparently both curry lovers).They had established their headquarters in Hoxton in the traditional working-class heartland of East London. They also used to publish propaganda materials through their weekly called *The National Front*. They made the local British Bangladeshi community their primary targets. They mobilised their skinhead thugs to attack Bengalis daily on the streets, shopping centres, workplaces and even their homes. There were certain "no go areas" for Asians and Blacks in the East London. Many young people who were responsible for the racial violence against working-class British Bengalis were the sons and daughters of local Labour politicians, trade unionists and white working-class people. The situation was such that these people felt that they had a license to commit such harassment, violence and political intimidation. The police usually took the side of the racists and supported the perpetrators instead of the victims. We sadly also found that many Jewish people, who were historically victims of racial attacks by the fascists, were opposed to their British Bengali neighbours and some event used violence against them. I was attacked by a group of elderly Jewish women at a public meeting at Montefiore Centre, in Hanbury Street, E1 (now part of the new Spitalfields and Banglatown ward).

However, there were a handful of people in the Spitalfields area, who became engaged with the Bengali youth through the local Montefiore Centre, spearheaded by a local resident from the ChicksandEstate, Cathy Forrester. The most important link she was able to support and create was between a few young Bengalis like me and the Labour leader of the Tower Hamlets council Paul Beasley. He knew that like the Jewish community in the past, British Bengalis will prevail in the borough and openly started attending anti-racist meetings, rallies and demonstrations.

The racist divide was clear to see, and the establishment turned a blind eye to the ongoing racism in East London, because it suited their agenda of "divide, rule and conquer". Faced with the harsh reality of institutionalised racism and the racist murders of a number of people in the East End of London, including Bengali Altab Ali and Ishaque Ali in Tower Hamlets, West Indian Michael Ferreira in Hackney, Kenneth Singh in Newham, burning down of the Pakistani Khan family in Waltham forest and of course the killing of an Australian white teacher from Tower Hamlets in the hands of the police during an anti-racist demonstration in Southhall, the younger generation in the British Bengali community in the East End were faced with a key question - what action to take?

The older generation of Bengalis who originated from East Pakistan, following the partition of old India, had by 1971 become citizens of the new commonwealth country called Bangladesh by defeating foreign rulers and acclaiming independence. Majority of the older generation had planned to return to their homeland, after earning sufficient funds. However, the younger generation had to decide on their future in the UK. Many of these young people were born in their native East Pakistan and inspired by the experience of the "Mukthi-Juddho" or independence movement to overcome foreign subjugation, decided that their future was in the UK. Hence, the community resistance movement started initially with various anti-racist events, rallies and demonstrations in 1976, and later with a march with the symbolic coffin of murdered Altab Ali on14th May 1978. The demonstration attracted some ten thousand British Bengalis, some local white working-class people, trade unionists and members of the Anti-Nazi League (ANL).

The slogans on the streets which expressed the community sentiments included:

"Enough is Enough"
"Here to stay here to fight"
"Self-defence is no offence"
"End police brutality -now"
"What do we want – justice, when -Now"
"Black and white unite and fight"

This historical march started in drenching rain from the St Mary's Church yard in Whitechapel (now known as the Altab Ali Park), travelled through central London and stopped for a solidarity rally at the Hyde Park speakers' corner (where I was the youngest speaker on behalf of the Bangladeshi Youth Movement, BYM). On the way back, we delivered a petition to the office of the PM, 10 Downing Street, asking for action to protect and defend the rights and entitlement of the Bengali community.

The presence of the British Bangladeshi community used to be either ignored or unknown to many. We all used to be regarded as Indians. For the first time, one of the mainstream newspapers wrote a two-inch-long piece about the plight of the Bengali community in the East End of London.

This was the beginning of the "turning point" for the British Bangladeshis and we started vigorously campaigning against racism and fascism through "the Battle of Brick Lane in 1978".Our past campaigns against racial violence, homelessness and a lack of stake in the mainstream society now took a different turn and we started our campaigns for equality, freedom and justice. Compared to the Battle of Cable Street in 1936, the Battle of Brick Lane in 1978 was a resistance movement, which lasted for another year.

Eventually we were able to force the NF to close their headquarters in Hoxton and they relocated to Welling in Kent. [See photo taken by photographers like Paul Trevor, exhibited by the Four Corners project "The Turning Point"]

The net result was that the establishment took note of the existence of the British-Bangladeshi community and the Home Affairs Committee Select Committee decided to compile a report on the needs, issues and aspirations of the British-Bangladeshi community and started collecting evidence from voluntary, faith-based and statutory organisations, which completed in 1985. Subsequently, the establishment was forced to respond to community demands and public services begun to make their services more accessible. Regional and central government started becoming more responsive, helped by the arrival of Ken Livingstone as leader of the GLC. Bengalis also began to get involved in mainstream institutional, political and economic engagements. A new chapter begun.

British parliamentary opposition leader Margaret Thatcher, who later became the PM of the UK, legitimised racism against the visible minority communities through her Granada TV interview comment on 30th January 1978, stating the people are rather concerned that the UK is "rather swamped by people of different cultures". It established the new phase of weaponising racism by a mainstream political leader.

The general election in 2019 was made into a referendum on Europe. The "migration issue" has been weaponised for political convenience. We have seen the rise in racial strife intensified over the last five years, including violent events and far right mobilisations, often based on disinformation. The latest example is to be found in the murder case of Henry Nawak. Nigel Farage's "called for cool rage" and false claim of a "two tier policing service" led to violent rioting in Southampton. The Home Secretary obliged by ordering a review of existing anti-racist policy guideline. By implication the whole Sikh community is being blamed for the actions of one individual. Yet most of the recorded victims of police failures are Asian, Black and women in our society.

The failure of the established mainstream political parties to provide for the aspirations and needs of the working-class majority in the UK has resulted in populist politics. The new cheer leaders are the Reform UK, promoting racism within an institutional and respectable framework, whilst leaving the EDL to agitate and weaponise migration and racism on the streets of the UK. Both evil forces are being funded by millionaires and billionaires, often based overseas and tax heavens to avoid paying UK tax.

With an intent to overtake Reform UK, the Labour leader Kier Starmer, started using racist political language akin to those of Powell, Thatcher and Farage.He commented in a press conference in May 2025, "we risk becoming an island of strangers, not a nation that works forward together."He did not learn anything from history. This is why he is facing imminent extinction.

To conclude, let us return to the reality of life in the East End of London. We know for a fact that the establishment will not be interested in changing the status quo, in favour of creating a better society for the working classes. It will prefer to promote division, greed and profiteering to keep communities divided through their control of wealth, political and economic instruments. As in the past, we will need to revive the momentum of the Battle of Cable Street and Brick Lane to sustain our communities against racism, fascism and Islamophobia. Only we can help ourselves, but collectively.