

Remembering the 1970s

Sunahwar Ali



Mr. Ali was a radical political activist in the late 1970s and the founding member of Bangladesh Youth Front. He was closely linked in establishing the Kabi Nazrul Centre and was also involved in renaming the Montefiore School as Osmani School. He was associated with the Asian Unemployment Outreach Project (AUOP) in the East End.

..... Once I was in school, I was attacked by 5-7 girls and two boys. I was beaten up very badly, in the school corridor. Then one of the teachers took me to the hospital. My father stopped me coming to the school for two and half month. That was one of the incidences. Time to time there was a lot of attack took place; I faced myself, my family. We used to live in Hackney Road and just behind the children hospital, and every time I used to go out, my mother used to be near the window, looking for me when I am coming. Because the racist young people used to attack me on so many times, they used to break our window always.

..... it started in 1976 when all the racist attack took place in Brick Lane, surrounding Brick Lane by National Front (NF). That time I used to live in Hackney, and I used to attend school just across the road; (the) former Robert Montefiore School, the school is no longer there. We set up a football team called the Bengal Tigers.

..... The Anti-Nazi League (ANL) was active in the East London area especially in the Brick Lane and there used to be meeting and demonstration against the National Front and so on. We were the young people, we realised that we need to form some kind of organisation. Bangladesh Welfare Association was there but they weren't taking any active part in the anti-racist activity. They were solely engaged in activities, what they used to do and what they believe.

..... We decided to form a youth organisation. That time some of our friends came together and we formed Bangladesh Youth Front in the beginning of 1978. In the same period, on the other side of Commercial Road, the Bangladesh Youth Movement was formed. There was a Bangladesh Youth Association and Bangladesh Youth League. Mainly two organisations were active and they had a vast young people involved with them; Bangladesh Youth Front and Bangladesh Youth Movement. Initially we were not known to each other and then we came to know one another and we decided to work together closely, though using different name and different organisation, we were working together.

..... When Altab Ali was killed, everybody was upset about it and lot of the young people used to know him, because he was a local person. Since 1976, all the racist attacks were taking place and it came to a turning point on that incidence. At (the) time Altab Ali was killed, everybody told, "we had enough, now we need to do something about it" and as a result we managed to organise the demonstration and it was one of the biggest gathering in history ever seen. We marched with his coffin from Altab Ali Park (via) Downing Street to Hyde Park.

..... Then subsequently we discovered life, we need to get engaged in some of the tenant associations. Subsequently getting involved in tenant associations wasn't getting us anywhere. So we decided to get involved in mainstream local politics.

There was one of our prominent leaders at that time, Fakaruddin Ahmed, who stood by us always; because all the older generation was behind the (Bangladesh) Welfare Association and they were blaming us, saying, "Those are the young people who will be responsible, if the British government decides to kick us out of the country". Fakaruddin was the only elderly person who was giving us all kind of support and he thought we were doing the right thing and he was part of us and we got lot of encouragement from him.

..... Other side of the road Bangladesh Youth Movement was formed and Shah Lutfur Rahman was the pioneer of the organisation. Some of the youths who were involved with Bangladesh Youth Movement had a conflict with their parents, because our parents didn't liked the activity of Bangladesh Youth Movement, we were involved in. So as a result they didn't have anywhere to live. So they started living in number 7, the TOC H in Tower Hill. It was arranged by mainly Peter East and he was running the TOC H and he was supporting the Bangladesh Youth Movement and so on.

..... In 78, after death of Altab Ali, on one Sunday the National Front marched through Brick Lane and started smashing all the windows of all the shops. We used to sit in the Nazrul's café now the Nazrul restaurant. Subsequently we realised the situation, people were screaming and shouting, we went out and saw the National Front and Skinheads were coming with the sticks and bricks and so on and were marching on. They were about 25-30 in number. Sunday was the off day and most of us were there in vigilance of any attack of something like that, we were mentally prepared to defend ourselves. We got out to face them, subsequently police came after 5 minutes. They managed to arrest some of them. I don't know what happened after the arrest. But first half an hour police didn't do anything at all, when they were smashing all the windows of the Bengali shop. We had hand to hand fight with them. We thought, this is Brick Lane, this is our home and if we don't defend Brick Lane then we can't live in the country. We had to, we didn't have any choice.