

The big lie

Jamal Hasan



Jamal Hasan was a leading anti-racist activist in East London during the 1970s. He was the General Secretary of the Action Committee Against Racial Attacks which organised the National Demonstration following the murder of Altab Ali.

Let's remind ourselves of the infamous theory of [Adolf Hitler's Propaganda Minister](#), Joseph Goebbels:

"Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth."

Big lies have been repeatedly injected in the media surrounding the resistance movement of the 1970s in East London. Sadly it appears that the propaganda that the Anti Nazi League (ANL) and the International Socialist (IS, now SWP) mobilised the Bangladeshi community and led the resistance movement of the 1970s in East London have been well established.

Recently a self-proclaimed Bangladeshi leader claimed that he singlehandedly mobilised the entire Bangladeshi community and won the battle of Brick Lane. This is also an utter lie as nothing could be further from the truth. However such an unbelievable lie has been established through one of the most respectable media, BBC World Service, ("Witness, Battle of Brick Lane.")

The hard facts about the resistance movement of the 1970s in East London are that different umbrella organisations at different periods of time were formed to mount the resistance movement in the 1970s in East London. It was never ever a national organisation and certainly not an individual, but the local community groups who mobilised the Bangladeshi community to mount the resistance movement. When the community was under attack by the far-right National Front (NF), we looked to the authority to protect us from the vicious racist attacks. However, the police turned a blind eye to the situation. Various local Bangladeshi organisations and the anti-racist individuals felt the necessity of forming an umbrella organisation to protect the community from racist attacks. The first such umbrella organisation was the 'Anti Racist Committee of Asians in East London' (ARCAEL). The ARCAEL organised a mass meeting at the Naaz cinema Hall in the middle of Brick Lane on 12th June 1976 and convinced the Bangladeshi community that we could not rely on the authorities to protect us and we had to fight back and defend ourselves. ARCAEL organised vigilante groups and confronted the NF thugs who would run their stall at the corner of Bethnal Green Road and Brick Lane every Sunday to sell their filthy propaganda literature and to recruit new members. The police took notice of these confrontations. However, this resulted in increasing numbers of arrests of the Asians. At one point the police told us that whichever group went to the spot first would be allowed to have their presence. We started mobilising ourselves early in the morning and the NF tried to be there before us. We then decided to start gathering at the corner of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road on Saturday evenings and kept on occupying the spot overnight.

It was the entire community under the leadership of ARCAEL engineered the resistance movement in East London in the 1970s.

After Altab Ali was brutally murdered on 4th May 1978, the Bangladeshi community vowed to stamp out racist attacks once and for all. We took to the street and we shouted slogans, "Enough is Enough" "Come What May, We Are Here to Stay." "Here to Stay, Here to Fight" "Black and White Unite and Fight". Immediately, after the death of Altab Ali, another umbrella organisation, "Action Committee Against Racial Attacks" (ACARA), was formed for the specific purpose of organising a national demonstration. In just 10 days preparation, ACARA successfully organised a National Demonstration to highlight the lack of police action to protect the victims of racial attacks in East London. We marched from Brick Lane to Hyde Park for a rally and then went to Downing Street to give a petition to the Prime Minister demanding a full investigation into the police handling of racist attacks in East London and more protection of immigrants. The petition was given by the chair of the ACARA, Mr Taibur Rahman who was accompanied by the General Secretary, Jamal Hasan and five other committee members, namely Shiraz Uddin, Shoeb Chowdhury, Gulam Mustafa, Akikur Rahman and Zia Uddin Lala. One can see the news coverage with a photograph in front of 10 Downing Street in the East London Advertiser, dated 19th May 1978. This is available in the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, 277 Bancroft Rd, London E1 4DQ (near the Queen Mary University). Two days before the national demonstration, ACARA issued a press release which appeared in the East London Advertiser on 12 May 1978, "...In a joint statement, committee members Taibur Rahman, Jamal Hasan and Shiraz Uddin told the Advertiser: 'This march condemns the death of Altab Ali. It has been called to publicise what is happening to Asians in East London so that everyone can learn of the attacks which make us daily victims....'"

From these two newspaper articles, it is obvious that it was the umbrella organisation ACARA which mobilised the community and organised the national demonstration.

There were a few more umbrella organisations since 1978. 'Hackney and Tower Hamlets Defence Committee was another important umbrella organisation which organised a one-day strike by the Asian and black workers in East London and had a sit-in protest in front of the Bethnal Green Police station demanding the release of some of our members who were arrested in the demonstration. The police had to give in to our demand and released the three of our members arrested earlier. Thames TV broadcasted a short documentary highlighting this event which can be viewed on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eyuw50IYk4A>

Again, none of the people interviewed in this documentary were from ANL or white community leaders. Mala Dohndy, Patrick Kodicara, Jamal Hasan (myself), Alok Biswas, Rohim Bokhs, Noor Uddin and others appeared in this documentary. However, there is no mention of the particular youth leader or his youth group which claims, in the "Witness" programme, to have been in the forefront of the resistance movement. It was Rajon Uddin Jalal, of Bangladesh Youth Movement (BYM) and Akikur Rahman of Bangladesh Youth Association who were the most prominent youth leaders at that time. The BBC made a documentary film, "Will to Win", highlighting the contributions of these two youth leaders for their determination to defeat the racists in East London. The other prominent youth leader was Siraj from Bangladesh Youth front. The authority imposed a curfew on Siraj, prohibiting him entering the Brick Lane on Sundays.

The ANL and the SWP and all White anti racist people in London supported our resistance movement and the Bangladeshi community has always been grateful to these two organisations, but it is a lie that they led the Bangladeshi community in the resistance movement. The local non-Bangladeshi activists were Terry Fitzpatrick, Cathy Peters, Dan

Jones and few others. It was Terry Fitzpatrick who first politicised the Bangladeshi community and gave them the taste of direct action by starting the squatting movement in East London. It was his initiative which helped organising the 'Bengali Housing Action Group' (BHAG)

It is a pure lie that the self-proclaimed Bangladeshi leader, who was a teenager in 1978, led the resistance movement. Unfortunately these lies have become established through various fake documents. There is no reason for people who have had no direct experience of the actual events to question these lies as this propaganda has been approved by the established media. Last year we saw a brilliant play on Altab Ali, "Battle of Brick Lane". The author of this play, after research, was influenced by the fake information and gave credit to white individuals and organisations for mounting the resistance movement. Last year, a (Bangladeshi) university lecturer wrote an article in a newspaper re-establishing similar lie, ".....Bangladeshis teamed up with the Socialist Party and trades unions and engaged in mass demonstrations and strikes, which were successful in eventually forcing out the National Front from the area.

Neither the author of the play nor the lecturer of the university had any direct knowledge of the facts that it was the Bangladeshis who engineered the resistance movement and the ANL/SWP and other anti-racist people only supported us. How can anyone blame them? They were misled by fake news.

However, the self-proclaimed leader who was a teenager in 1978 saw everything through his own eyes. He has claimed (in a BBC World Service programme, "Witness"), that after the murder of Altab Ali people approached him and his youth organisation to do something. He and his newly formed youth organisation then mobilised the Bangladeshi community and won the 'Battle of Brick Lane'. His claim that he went to 10 Downing Street to hand in a petition to the Prime Minister is nothing but a fantasy. Some of us, who were active in the anti-racist movement in the 1970s remember so well how Bangladeshi community and the various youth organisations struggled to protect the community by organising vigilante groups, by securing the properties of the Bengalis when attacked by the racist thugs. It has always been the umbrella organisations consisting of various Bangladeshi community groups and youth groups who mobilised the entire community by organising regular demonstrations in Brick Lane and by occupying the Bethnal Green end of Brick Lane every Sunday. However, why would people not believe something broadcasted by the BBC? The BBC, unfortunately, has become involved, may be inadvertently, in establishing this lie.

One of the main reasons that the Altab Ai Foundation (AAF) launched a website was to document the facts as they had happened. Before the AAF website was launched, the 'Swadhinata Trust' documented facts by interviewing people who were involved with the resistance movement of 1978. Unfortunately, both the Swadhinata Trust and AAF website are failing to convey the right message. What is worrying is that as a normal practice the BBC has already archived their recent programme, 'Witness'. People in future, sadly, will acquaint themselves with a pack of lies.

People who are concerned about fake news should try to stop people distorting history. If such lies go on unchallenged, it will mean that we have not given due respect and honour to the people who sacrificed and struggled to establish the Bengali community in East London during that difficult time.

Jamal Hasan
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