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NOTHING HAD CHANGED EVERYTHING HAD CHANGED

On the 40th anniversary of a racist murder in London's East End, SARAH GLYNN remembers a movement born of tragedy that profoundly affected one East End minority

On 14th May 1978 a strange procession made its way from Brick Lane to 10 Downing Street. At its head was a hearse belonging to the local Muslim undertakers, bearing the coffin of a 24-year-old garment worker, Altab Ali, and behind marched some 7,000 Bengalis of all ages. Ten days earlier Ali was walking home from work when he was set upon and fatally stabbed by three teenage boys. It was the day of the local council elections; the National Front was standing 41 candidates and racism was in the air. When the boys – two white and one mixed race – were caught and questioned by the police, they made it clear that Ali had lost his life simply for being a “Paki”.

This funeral protest is seen as the seminal event in the evolution of Bengali antiracism in the East End of London, but it needs to be looked at as part of a decade of racist violence and antiracist mobilisation. As the UK's immigrant population grew, so did the scapegoating of immigrants for all manner of unconnected social problems. While polite society adopted racist immigration laws, skinhead gangs took a more directly brutal approach. Among the London Bengalis, the first moves into self-defence were aimed at providing protection from “Paki-bashing” gangs in 1970; more significant mobilisation did not occur until the second half of the decade. By that time, family reunification had brought a new generation of young Bengalis who were growing up Britain.

Everyday racism made families afraid to go out but they felt unsafe in their homes too. National Front paper sales provided a rallying point for racist youth violence. Bengali mobilisation took the form

of a mass squatting movement in response to a chronic shortage of housing and institutional racism in housing allocations, as well as protection from and protests against racism. Activists from the radical black organisation, Race Today, played a leading part in organising the squatting movement, and in 1976 they set up the Anti-Racist Committee of Asians in East London, which organised vigilante patrols to protect against the increasing racist violence. That year also saw the establishment of the first Bengali youth groups, which took a prominent part in anti-racist struggles.

While Altab Ali's murder and the protest it inspired are now commemorated in the park that bears his name and an annual memorial day, this did not signal the end of racism or racist violence. Bengalis were organising regular vigils to try to exclude the National Front paper sellers from their Brick Lane pitch, but violence continued, and on 11th June a mob of some 150 skinhead youths rampaged down the street throwing bottles and stones through shop windows. Bengali protests couldn't stop the National Front making a deliberately provocative move into new offices in Shoreditch that September. The police were persuaded to set up a police station in Brick Lane, but the force itself was deeply and institutionally racist, preferring to arrest antiracists rather than racists. When the violence did eventually retreat from Brick Lane, it focused on other places where Bengalis were more isolated. Altab Ali was not the first Bengali victim of racist murder and nor was he the last. Ishaq Ali was killed in Hackney just a month after Altab Ali's death, and there have been

other attacks and murders since. Electoral support for the National Front was falling, and the organisation imploded after its disastrous result in the 1979 general election, but, far from disappearing, their ideas infiltrated the rhetoric of mainstream politicians.

From the outside it might appear that little had been achieved but for those who took part in the protests, the difference was palpable and profound. Nothing had changed, but everything had changed. As numerous recollections of these events testify, this was the moment when the community as a whole took courage from their collective actions and began to believe that they had rights in this country and the ability to defend them. There had been mass mobilisation before, in support of

Bangladeshi independence, but this was different. Suroth Ahmed's account is typical of how those times are remembered:

"I came to Britain in 1972. To my observation we had the mindset that we, the Asian and the Bengali people don't have the right to be here. We are here only to work, not to demand any rights of our own. We have to hide ourselves from the white racist, we have to be indoors after sunset, and we have to group together to be safe... But after the killing of Altab Ali, the scenario was completely different... We never expected such huge number of people would come out to protest the killing... And I believe we never ever were unconscious of our rights after that. The Bengali community developed after that incident day by day... It was like the people were sleeping, unaware of their rights and dignity, suddenly something woke them all; they begin to realise their power of unity..."

"Here to stay, here to fight" was already a popular slogan with the Asian youth movements, but the sentiment, if not the militant language, was now reflected in a new confidence shared with the community at large.

This qualitative change in community confidence echoes the Battle of Cable Street some four decades earlier, where the impact on the protestors had also been more significant than the immediate impact on the fascists. Confidence was vitally important, but on its own it was not enough to undermine the racist threat. And beyond this, these two seminal antiracist struggles were very different, reflecting the different nature of wider progressive politics in the two eras. East End Jews still lived relatively segregated lives, even in the 1930s, but their politics, dominated by the

Communist Party, stressed the importance of working-class unity to address fundamental structural inequalities. Their prescription for reducing racism was to attack the social problems on which racist scapegoating can feed.

By the 1970s, class politics was giving way to the politics of identity. Race Today and other ethnic minority activists promoted separate organisation and a suspicion of what they called the "white left". Little attempt was made to create links with the wider working class and create a joint struggle against the economic forces holding everyone back. While organised left groups came to the East End to show support, "Black and white unite and fight" was often more an empty slogan than political reality; and for most of those involved,

structural forces were not analysed or addressed. As inequalities grew under the Thatcher government, identity politics cut across the class-based understanding and organisation needed to fight back. Identity politics focused energy away from the wider struggle for a fairer system, leaving people still looking for a scapegoat, and separate organisation made it harder to prevent immigrants being seen as "other".

The emphasis, both from the Bengalis and from antiracist politics more generally, was generally limited to ensuring ethnic minorities received their fair share of the cake, rather than achieving more

fundamental change. Many of the young men (and traditional mores meant they were almost all men) who were mobilised in the antiracist struggles of the 1970s went on to fight for their community through a Labour Party that was soon shifting to the right. And although the Bengali community continued to grow in prominence and confidence, racism has not gone away.

By the 1990s, after over a decade of Tory attacks on the working class, the British Nationalist Party awakened memories of 1978 as it persuaded some of those suffering from falling living standards and lack of work and housing to blame their situation on their immigrant neighbours. And more recently, with growing inequality and now also austerity, we have seen the rise of UKIP and of the EDL. Without a class-based politics that addresses the inequalities on which prejudice thrives, racism will continue to reappear.

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