**[Introduction to the 1st strand by Ansar Ahmed Ullah and John Eade](http://www.swadhinata.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=128&Itemid=158)**

**Introduction to 1st strand**

**Roots and memory - the history of Bangladesh and the 1971 war of independence Dialogue between first and third generation on the history of Bangladesh and the 1971 war of independence**

We begin the oral history with people’s memories of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and events leading to the liberation war. We see here the importance of language as both a unifying and divisive factor. Bengali became a rallying point for those in East Pakistan who wanted a fairer political and social deal within Pakistan generally. Urdu became, in contrast, a source of division with the attempt to establish it as the national language very soon after the creation of Pakistan. Although the majority of Bengalis in East Pakistan were Muslims, similar attempts to forge national unity through the politicisation of Islam failed to unite the two wings divided by over a thousand miles of Indian territory.

As the interviews make clear, the liberation war was not just fought in the Bengal delta. By 1971 a small but growing Bengali community had been established in the UK and in many places, such as London, Luton, Birmingham and Manchester, they worked with or lived near Pakistanis, who had migrated from the Punjab and Kashmir. It is interesting to note that Bengalis were active in political activity before 1971 as they supported Awami League’s Six Point programme (1966), which demanded greater autonomy for East Pakistan and campaigned for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s release after he was arrested in 1968 (the Agartala conspiracy case).

During the war of Bangladesh in 1971, the community played an important role in highlighting the atrocities taking place in Bangladesh, lobbying British government and the international community and raising funds for refugees and Bengali freedom fighters (Mukti Bahini). It is said that some people donated their entire week’s salary and at least in one case where a women donated her entire wedding gift of gold jewellery. There were even people willing to go and fight in Bangladesh. Many Bengalis talked about the prejudice they faced from Pakistanis in the UK. There were even physical clashes between Pakistanis and Bengalis as the war started. As we shall see in the Second Strand, a key feature of this period was the support provided by members of the white British majority – in this case, politicians, diplomats, lawyers and journalists.

The interviews then move on to exploring people’s participation in the public events which commemorate the language movement and the liberation war. From there we proceed to their views about returning to their country of origin and what they think about contemporary Bangladesh. This section concludes with the interviewees discussing the importance of telling younger British Bengalis about the past.

Ansar Ahmed Ullah and John Eade

P.S. from John Eade – One of the most enjoyable aspects of this project has been reading about the experiences of those who were directly involved in events which I observed distantly during 1970-1971. I was beginning a research career which eventually led me from a study of the social identity of the educated Bengali Muslim middle class in Kolkata (Calcutta) during 1970-71 to a doctorate on British Bangladeshi community representation in Tower Hamlets between 1980 and 1986 and subsequent research and publications on British Bangladeshi political and cultural developments.

I spent most of my time in Kolkata living with a Bengali Muslim family, whose relatives had left the city for Dhaka after the partition of British India in 1946 but had to flee back to Kolkata in 1971. For a short time eight of us were sleeping in a two room flat and there were lively discussions about what was going to happen over the next months. One idea eagerly debated was the possibility of a united Bengal but this flew against the realities of geo-politics in the region as events were to prove. Soon after I returned to the UK a new nation-state was born – Bangladesh – and the ‘Greater Bengal’ idealists were left with their dreams.

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