**Mr. Nooruddin Ahmed**



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Interviewed by: Jamil Iqbal, Charlie Sen and Riza Momin

Mr. Ahmed in the 1970s was a young political activist and the founding member of Bangladesh Youth League. He also worked for Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Justice (THARJ) and was one of the field officers responsible for monitoring the racial incidents in and around Brick Lane. Currently he is working for a community research organisation in East London.

**Q: Have you been involved in the youth movement or anti-racist struggle or any political party?**
I was involvement in both youth movement and the anti-racist struggle. First I started with involvement (in) the youth movement in 1978 that was very much a spontaneous response of the Bangladeshi community with support of the host community and number of other communities who felt threatened by racism at that time. So that was a movement rather then anything organised, and subsequently, the interest of the people have grown into various things including politics and another way to address whatever we had to achieve. What we were doing in 1978, we were responding to a very much short-term spontaneous situation. But in order to achieve anything in long term, we would of had to have taken a long-term strategy and long-term strategy has to be a political one. So therefore people started to join political party. And I personally always felt that I have something more common with the Labour Party, I can’t remember but I think I have been a paid member of the Labour Party (since) 1973. I am still one (today). .



**Q: Can you remember the turning point of the Altab Ali murder? Can you tell us the memories about Altab Ali murder and what happened afterwards and the demonstration?**

I remember at that time I used to work in a restaurant, obviously we had very little time to interact with the host community people; we were just doing our own thing and they were doing their own (thing) and living their own life. So the death of Altab Ali was a shock to everyone, which was absolutely unimaginable. Obviously the small incidents happened every now and then. But some-one being murdered purely because he was (of a) different colour was totally (unacceptable). So there was a tremendous sense of shock, we felt it; then community organised meetings and demonstrations, all were just spontaneous there was nothing pre-planned. A murder happened, it was terribly shocking, people organised the demonstrations, and it was a very big demonstration, huge demonstration. It started from the Altab Ali Park, which used to be known as St. Mary’s Garden or something. The demonstration ended up in Hyde Park. It was a big, well organised, and well disciplined and people responded to it very spontaneously. Obviously it was not just Bangladeshis or Bengalis. Bengalis were at the forefront as they were the victims, but they were supported by the progressive forces in this country like, Anti-Nazi League, people in labour movement, Socialist Workers Party and others.

**Q: What was the emotional experience of participants of the demonstration, how did you feel emotionally as part of the group? How did you instruct the people in the demonstration?**
The emotion was that everyone had a tremendous sense of loss, that we have lost somebody, a compatriot, but the other important factor was that you feel a sense of insecurity, but because there was enough and sufficient number of people there with the similar kind of feeling, we felt a sense of protection as well, a sense of solidarity. So (on) one hand you felt vulnerable, on the other hand you feel you are not alone, there are other people as well, willing to give you all the protection required that time, you needed physical protection, or just pure political support which was there as well. There was a very strong sense of community developed from there (on). And in this demonstration were not just people from East London or from Tower Hamlets; (they were there) from all over East London, everybody came and people from other parts of London came as well. Some people spent not (just) hours, even the whole day; some people (even) spent the night just to be around here. There was a time we needed to patrol the properties. National Front on one hand wanted to occupy Brick Lane to say that “Yes, we have taken the heart…of the Bangladeshis away from them”. And the Bangladeshis felt “Not here, (not) Brick Lane, we have to protect (it)”. The … protecting was done, it was not just Bangladeshi, obviously youth were at the forefront, but Bangladeshi elderly were equally involved. Like people from the other communities played a crucial role as well, providing moral and physical as well as political support.

**Q: Were you a victim of any racial attack?**
I won’t claim that I had been personally attacked that frequently. Couple of times were there someone abusing me; you don’t pay attention to him, what was just expected and I just walked away. But it happened more in 1981, when I was physically attacked; it was not I alone, (a) group of us came out of a meeting, protesting about a racial incidence on a Bangladeshi family in a housing estate. It was in the evening, when we came out and people were walking, we found other Bangladeshis were being attacked. We went to defend those Bangladeshi families and we were attacked, especially Jalal and myself were attacked quite severely. I needed to go to the hospital because I had received a blow on my head. It was nothing very serious but because the blow was on my head, I just went to check on it. It was only one incident. But I know many of the incidents and the volatile situation of that time. Later on in 1981 onward, I used to work for Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Justice (THARJ), and I was one of the field officers responsible for monitoring the racial incidences and promoting racial harmony. So at that time I knew how Bangladeshi families used to be attacked and the sense of insecurity, especially you can see the fear in eyes of the mothers, when their children gone to school; they will have the anxiety; will they come back home safely. Some of the housing estates used to be no- go area, especially in the other side of Commercial Road, Teviot Estate, Lincoln’s Estate, Glamis Estate, there was a place in Stepney Green used to be no go areas for Bangladeshis.

**Q: Can you take us through it?**
I can’t exactly recall how (many), but I would say Bangladeshi media, there wasn’t much apart from few weekly newspapers. I think it would have been mostly through word of mouth we had to communicate. The community was relatively small (and this method was) very effective, people used to be very close. In that sense I would had heard about things through word of mouth, rather than radio, television etc. There was nothing in terms of radio or television (for us), there was nothing dedicated for Bangladeshis, probably BBC would have been doing some kind of World Service or other Asian programmes. So I guess it would have been through word of mouth, rather (the general media), this kind of means travelled really fast, people (took it) very seriously and so apart from this major demonstration there (were others) , it was a routine thing that every day there will be some kind of meeting or demonstration somewhere. But definitely every Sunday, there used to be some kind of gathering at the top end of Brick Lane, on the corner of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road; where National Front used to come to sell their newspapers. So every Saturday evening, Bangladeshi youth will try to go there occupy it overnight and try to stay there during the day as well. That would have been routine thing for months after months.

**Q: Were you involved in those?**
Yes, I used to live near the spot about 50 yards from there in Bethnal Green. I had lived there for several months. We used to be there night or (day) whenever if we were not there we used to have a vigilant team. It was a mixture of both old and young Bangladeshis and non-Bangladeshis and there would be obviously meetings in places like Robert Montefiore Centre (now Bethnal Green Training Centre), Kabi Nazrul Centre, Toynbee Hall. If you go to the other side of Commercial Road, there was Cable Street, Cannon Street Road, so some kind of meetings will be there. What people realised, this is not an isolated incident, and someone has been murdered, so the root lies in social injustice, social inequalities and that had to be addressed. And those were evident even before, during and after; the Bengalis were having other campaigns to have better housing, better education. This area used to be pretty rundown there used to be lots of empty properties, yet people didn’t have homes, they were squatting instead. So those all had to be addressed and therefore you cannot address all (those issues) in one or two demonstrations, people had to plan.

**Q: Can you tell us, what was the scenario of Brick Lane in 1969?**
When I came in 1969, I didn’t know what was the number of Bangladeshis here, it was very small community. Still you can feel it was a predominant Jewish community, though they started moving (out) by 1969 in larger numbers; but lots of factories, tailoring factories, shops were owned by the Jewish people. Some were owned by Pakistanis and , some by Turkish as well. So there were not many Bangladeshi owned factories or shops but Bangladeshis were working in factories. And it was mainly the men, until after the liberation (of Bangladesh); you could count number of families on your hands, very small. In terms of facilities, people would have been sharing, sharing rooms, or a flat, sharing food and sharing houses. Lots of houses wouldn’t have television, people will go there and it was a routine thing, from Monday to Friday and sometime on Saturdays people will work overtime then there was no bath inside the house. People will go to public bath, have their bath and for men it have been a routine thing to go to watch television on Saturday, watching wrestling on television. It was one of the most popular programmes for elderly or middle aged man. That was what their routine entertainment. That’s how it was. Now a days Brick Lane is completely different, now you have a Brick Lane where thousands of people are coming and the population has grown. Brick Lane caters food for wide range of people from outside. But at that time Brick Lane was catering in terms of employment it was catering for Bangladeshis, in terms of shops and other facilities. I think there was lots of solidarity as well. Where as now community has grown, people have (other) responsibilities, family has grown, and they have their own responsibilities. Right after 1971, the community was quite relatively small. In 1970 people started to move in quite large number into this area. And there were two major factors, one was up in the North, factories were closing so people started to come here in East London for employment. On the other hand in 1971, there was the liberation war in Bangladesh, so people was fleeing Bangladesh and they didn’t find employment in the North so they started coming here. So it became overcrowded at some point. Because people had the solidarity, people put up with extra people in their house and somehow managed.

**Q: Can you tell us about the Bangladesh Youth League, how and why it was formed? Please tell us about the Bangladesh Youth Federation (Federation of Bangladeshi Youth Organisations), why these organisations were formed and what was their purpose?**
When the incident of Altab Ali happened and Altab Ali was killed, the Bangladeshi community was not organised in the sense that had lots of organisation like today, in various subjects and interests you will find some organisation for that particular purpose. Obviously, the largest and oldest organisation that we had at that time was the Bangladesh Welfare Association. It was an old organisation and we were proud of it. It was the only organisation that was going for so many years and they had their own property and (it’s) something to be proud of, but it wasn’t exactly the right organisation to respond to the changing demands of Bangladeshi community. So people started to look into the problems that the community was facing, challenges the community was facing; and how to address them. In order to address those (problems) people thought that we need some kind of formal structure in terms of organisation. People started forming various organisations and there were four main youth organisations. One was Bangladesh Youth League, which I was a part of; the Bangladesh Youth Movement, Bangladesh Youth Front and Bangladesh Youth Association. Within them, I think there were two schools of thoughts, one was that we are just some sort of community type welfare organisation and other thought we are socio-political organisation. I came from the school of thought who believed that we are socio-political organisation, we are to challenge things politically, and we are to challenge because everything has a root in social justice and qualities. And Youth League was from that school. Interestingly the large number of people who set up Youth League; were people who were quite experienced with politics, they were involved in politics in Bangladesh and came into this country. Where as people with the other organisations were inexperienced about politics because they were local people, never been involved with politics. So there were a mixture .
At end of the day everyone thought we need to look into the root causes of our problem and address it. In order address we needed a mechanism, so people started forming organisations. We all had difference of opinion but one thing we had in common, that the community is facing problem and it has to be addressed. We all tried to do it in our own way, then later on we thought, we have got so many youth organisations, not only in Tower Hamlets but in other parts of London, as well as in other parts of the country. Therefore we need to unite them and provide them a united platform, so together we formed an organisation called, Federation of Bangladesh Youth Organisations (FBYO). It was an umbrella organisation. I was a chair of that organisation as well.… Later on a organisation called BENTH, (Bangladeshi Educational Needs in Tower Hamlets) was formed. It was more specifically to address the educational needs of Tower Hamlets. Then there was an organisation we set up to deal with the race relations only. Some of them were individual organisations, some of them were umbrella organisation; like FBYO was an umbrella organisation and it was a national organisation. BENTH was a local umbrella organisation specifically dealing with education. THARJ (Tower Hamlets Association for Racial Justice) was another umbrella organisation, but it was dealing with race relations and racial harmony locally.

**Q: Can you describe the restaurant scene at the time and how the community used the restaurants?**
There were basically two types of restaurants at that time; one obviously was for mainstream or host community and the other was the small restaurants for Bangladeshis In terms of number, the restaurants providing for Bangladeshi community would be very small and they would be mainly based in and around Brick Lane, this side (east). On the other hand around the Commercial Road and Cannon Street Road and on the other side. But mainly on this side of the road (Brick Lane), I think only four restaurants were there. These were Nazrul, Alauddin, Sonar Bangla and the Nirala, the four restaurants. They would provide mainly for Bangladeshi males. So menu at that time was very limited. It was nothing like today. Some of the restaurants wouldn’t have any printed menu anyway. You go there and ask them what is on today, they will tell and give you the list of curries, and veg’s and dhal (lentils) available. Some of the restaurant like especially the Sonar Bangla, will give you dhal free anyway. And it was the quite routine to use of those restaurants , like in the morning before they go to work they will take some as take-away for breakfast. Then come in the evening to have their meal. But in the weekend, people will be there for hours doing adda (chatting) there, talking, taking their time. Historically before 1978, especially in 1971, people started to use those places as a mean of getting news, as a mean of organising themselves. In 1971, we had seen demonstrations huge in its scale. Bangladeshis never before or after organised such large scale demonstrations after 1971 and those restaurants used to be main centre of organising or receiving people. Because people at that time were concerned not only about Bangladesh but their families back in Bangladesh. And the only way to receive information was through there. And at that time people did not have radio and television. So people would come there to get the recent information and listen to radio and watch the television. At that time literacy rate was very low among the Bangladeshi community. So people couldn’t read, so they had to come there and talk to someone who has read the newspaper and give the news. One interesting thing was, at that time you would find lots of Bangladeshi men, let alone reading English, they could not read a word of Bengali, but yet everyday and especially Sundays they would buy all the Sunday newspapers, go to someone who can read English and give them and say, “Look here are the newspaper, tell me what’s in it”. That’s how people showed the solidarity about Bangladesh and community used to work and those restaurants played a vital role, for giving information, receiving information, organising meetings and demonstrations and things like that.

**Q: Do you think that the demonstrations and the consciousness the Bengalis got in 1971, can be related to the Altab Ali murder?**
I think there is definitely a relation, if you look at something as a Bengali we have in our gene, some kind of politics. Earlier the few (who) were not active in terms of politics had a different kind of politics and people had different kind of priorities. But nothey had clear political consciousness, that’s why they formed (the) Bangladesh Welfare Association or (other) organisations of that type. Because that time they felt, what is our priority as Muslims we needed to have mosque, we needed to organise very well, we needed to make sure that we can send our dead bodies back to Bangladesh or if we needed to bury them here we had to have the facilities; we needed to give people advice people on welfare rights and immigration. So they did, and they did it because they had clear political mind. If you look at the demonstration itself, first demonstration in 1978, after Altab Ali’s murder, it was the elderly who took the initiative, and then the young people joined in. Then (it was) obviously the young people were able to march ahead of older people. They never left each other behind. It worked in a kind of solidarity. Some times older people felt, yes, (the) young should take lead, and we should support them, and sometime older people led and the young people supported it. So you can say it is a Bangladeshi ingredient or Bengali ingredient, people experienced the organisation of demonstration, lobbying MPs, House of Commons; handing petitions, everything worked, they use their skills and expertise. Again during 1971 movement affected in 1978 and subsequently as well. So those were transferable skills and young people also learned from them as well. If the young people say today, “No we didn’t learn anything from the older generation”, it will be wrong.

**Q: Do you think there was some sort of inspiration from Kabi Nazrul in the 1978 struggle?**
I think definitely people drew inspiration form the Bidrohi Kabi or rebel poet Nazrul, but before we go into it; let us look, how. You had the 1978 movement, and then people started to organise themselves, form various organisations and started to identify their various needs. One of the thing people used to do quite commonly was to organise various festivals like Eid, Independence Day, Victory Day etc. and that it was limited to the organising this kinds of events. Then people realized, in terms of organising events we always had to rely on hiring halls and other things, but we don’t have facilities for ourselves. We needed facilities, so people started to articulate themselves, put pressure on the local authority and the relevant bodies. Some point they got go-ahead to have a centre of their own. When it came naming the centre, there obviously whole lots of possibilities people can have to choose the name; because they asked, “What is this Centre for?” The Centre was the result of struggle over a number of years by the Bangladeshi community and Kabi Nazrul had represented back home, as he was a poet of people, he was himself a very ordinary man, and he always fought for the ordinary people, he was imprisoned for speaking for ordinary people. So people drew inspiration from him. Some of the poems, they can relate themselves with the struggle back in the subcontinent during Indian liberation and struggle here in Britain. Not only in terms of independence, here people weren’t expecting to be an independent state of their own, but economic emancipation. And if you look at Nazrul’s poem or writing, it was about ordinary men and women (and) about emancipation, getting better education, better housing; most importantly being recognised as a decent human being, look at his poem ‘Coolie’, ‘Majdur’ and ‘Samyabadi’ . That why people thought, what are we doing here? We are fighting against social inequalities and that’s what we want to do and here is the man long before us, had articulated this need and therefore (the) rightful name for a centre for the community will be Kabi Nazrul Centre. And it was, it used to be a very focal point of Bangladeshi community, that was the community felt that we have achieved something, here is the centre, right in the heart of the community. A centre we can call our centre, obviously it was totally different now, now it is more catering for work of Nazrul or more into arts and culture; where as at that time it was more like a community centre. It was catering for wide range of (needs of) the community.

**Q: Can you tell us about your involvement with political party and youth organisation?**
I think the two things were different. First of all when you look into a youth organisation or set up an youth organisation, being part of an youth organisation as a Bangladeshi, this is your need. While the Labour Party, it is much bigger platform, but (at) the end of the day, in order to change things for your own community, you want to achieve something for your own community, you have to use the political mechanism, you have to have access to resources. Politicians control resources, how do you get decent housing or employment or education? Because at that time; employment, education and housing- all used to be control by the local authority. Therefore only way you can do it, is to be a part of the mainstream politics; therefore I thought Labour Party was the right party, which I can associate and I can feel (close to) ideologically. And that would be a mean to achieve not only for my community, but as a person of Bangladeshi origin, here is the country I have adopted. This is my home, I have to contribute to it as well. And that’s the way of contributing to it. When I was an elected member, I did not only work for Bangladeshi people or Pakistani and Indian people. I worked for my constituency and of course it happened to be everyone, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, English, Somalian, African, Caribbean. That is what you can do through a mainstream political party. You can not change everything within Tower Hamlets, sometime you have to go beyond Tower Hamlets. I remember Youth League being one of the organisation, right from it’s emergence having political conscious, one of the thing we did, (was to) have a meeting in the House of Commons, lobbying the MPs directly, because at that time it was unthinkable going to the politician. We said no, here is the people who can make things happen, and it happened like we saw with the Brick Lane police station, which played quite important role in terms of having police presence in Brick Lane to give people the greater sense of security. Monitoring racial incidence and things like this. You have to have the political consciousness, and you have to be involved. And as a result, what’s happened next, even some people used to think that, No, we don’t want to be involved in the politics. Later they themselves became politicians, elected members of the council, holding various offices, elected offices within the council and other body. Right now we have leader of the council a Bangladeshi (Cllr. Abbas). We have a Mayor (Cllr. Doros Ullah) who is Bangladeshi. This very election taking place, almost 50% of the candidates are Bangladeshi. So all this happened because of the political involvement previously. And in the last general election we noticed, lots of people standing for MP.

**Q: Can you tell us about the housing condition and housing problem?**
We have to look at the old pictures of Brick Lane or the East London. The whole area used to be very rundown to start with. Second thing, there was lots of empty properties but on the other hand there were people who were living in very poor condition, and in over crowding conditions. But there was very little investment in the housing. So there was a movement going. The Squatting movement which was very strong. People thought with some political mind, what a waste of resources, you let the people suffer in a polluting condition, yet you are leaving properties empty, this can not be done. So people started squatting in to those houses Putting pressure on and as a result, an organisation called the Bangladeshi Housing Action Group was formed. But there were a number of other squatting groups as well. Sometimes it did worked, in some cases, the Council said, “Now we you form a housing association, if you can take charge of this, you will receive some grant, you can get grant from other places and among Bangladeshi housing associations, Spitalfields Housing Co-operative was the first to be formed, there was other tenants associations formed as well. The squatting movement involved very much the Bangladeshi people but we got lot of help from the very conscious White or non-Bengalis as well, who were politically conscious people. Just today I was reading the book “The New East End”, about how Tower Hamlets or old Bethnal Green has changed and , that people, very educated people; especially students, teachers, and social workers started to move here in this area, so here is a great injustice, that people live in appalling condition of over crowding and unhealthy condition. Yet there is lots of property round here, that needed very little attention with very little investment we can bring into use and give it to the people and bring them out of this misery. So people started putting pressure on, at that time pressure did work. . On Saturday I was working around here and I was walking along the Vallance Road, the park down there is a very rundown park, now you see beautiful parks, lots of beautiful houses around here, but it was not there before, it was broken and rundown area where you saw lots of garages or salvage yards or things like that.

**Q: Can you tell us about the conditions?**
You have to just imagine, (the) area literally was full of litter, lots of rundown houses and lots of houses where the stair well was not properly lit, not clean; you will find people live in over crowded conditions and there was very little repair or maintenance was done. That would have been due to a number of factors, one of the factors would be, the council or who ever responsible for maintaining those properties were not paying due attention. Either they didn’t have resources or they could not (be) bothered, because of the occupants happened to be Bangladeshis. It was not a priority for them. Second thing was the Bangladeshis were not articulated enough to go and demand, that I need this service, I need it now; from the council, because they could not speak English or didn’t know where to go. Now you have (a different) scenario because (although) there are organisations to help them, there are family members who understand English, they can write it and send emails and say look, “I have (to) sort (out this) problem, come and help me sort it out; sort it out quickly”. That couldn’t have been done at that time. So in lots of these houses people would have been living, a family of imagine 6 or 7 people living in a one bed room with one sitting room and one kitchen, sharing them. So the bed room will become a bed room as well as sitting room, they will not have a permanent bed room. Depending on the size of the kitchen, (). So it was very bad condition at that time. The repair work would have been very neglected as well, maintenance used to be very neglected. You see the whole area not just Brick Lane, the whole of Tower Hamlets was neglected, until late 1980s, things started to change.

**Q: Do you think it was a natural response from the White English community?**

That’s interesting, I am going back to the book again; it says, the White people feel that Bangladeshis has been benefited with the changes since 1980, . I found this is totally unjustified, because morally or legally; ignorance is not a self defence, you cannot be a racist or have prejudice and say that, “oh, I did this because I don’t know”. Ignorance is not a self-defence. Therefore, one of the worse affected area in the country, during the Second World War… East London was very badly damaged, not only physically in terms of economic infrastructure and everything and then the politicians came here to raise the moral of local population, They said, “Look, after the war, we will do lots of things for you”. And some of it was delivered and the other was not delivered. So therefore the White community felt a sense of betrayal, then the Bangladeshi community came and started to get some benefit. , I can see the White people might have some reason to feel aggrieved but I don’t think that is justifiable. It was utterly racism on White people’s part or who ever plays into it.

Lots of Bangladeshi will be happy to join the White people to demand for their rights as well and that’s what we did. When we talk about social justice, inequalities, we are not just talking about Bangladeshis we are talking about people in East London or Tower Hamlets as a whole, for everyone. When I was a councillor like the other councillors, we were talking about people as a whole, so we did not differentiate saying, “You have to do some thing for the Bangladeshi and not for the White”. White people’s anger was wrongly placed. Their anger should have been directed to people who were responsible for delivering goods and did not. They should have taken Bangladeshis with them, rather then taking their anger against Bangladeshi.

**Q: Who were the Skinheads? Whether they were local or whether did they came from outside?**
I think they were both local and from outside. The important thing is to look at the mechanism played in terms of organising them. There was an organisation, it was very resourceful and very organised, the National Front at that time and that was the organisation which was behind the scene. And therefore the Skinheads that came here are not all local people, there was lots of people from our side as well. Because they used to organise themselves out side Tower Hamlets, when and where to meet and where to attack; all these used to be very orchestrated, sometimes, two people (would) get together saw a poor Bangladeshi or a Black person, swear at them or abuse them or attack them. Those kind of things has happened, but when we talk about rampage in Tower Hamlets or along Brick Lane or Cannon Street Road, those were very well orchestrated and very well organised and National Front were behind them. Skinheads were National Front members or not, but they were motivated and organised by (the) National Front as an organisation. They came from all over London, outside London and other places.

**Q: How do you feel about the community spirit today around the Brick Lane area?**
I think of the whole community in different levels and different forms. If you look at the barriers, events in life of Bangladeshis here, one event was in 1971, it was a different time then, solidarity amongst the people was there. From one part of the country, people were coming here, finding a new home, a connection of Bangladesh, finding home, that was a different kind of solidarity. Then you have the 1978, on one hand people suddenly felt, vulnerable in their new home, they feel scared, but at the same time they feel they are strong as well. Because those vulnerability bought strength, unity among them, and they also felt that we are not alone. There are other people, Indian, Pakistani, African, and Caribbean coming to help, (to) work with them, (to) articulate and find solutions. So there were sense of solidarity and strength, they felt that, “We can do things ourselves, to stand on our feet, we can articulate ourselves, make our demands, channel our anger through proper means”. That’s what you had in those places, and as a result, appropriate mechanism or platform was created like organisations, young people organisation, and community centres, like Nazrul Centre, which was created as new mainly for Bangladeshis. But there were other centres Bangladeshis started to use. Until almost late 1980s, Robert Montefiore Centre which is now the Bethnal Green Training Centre, used to be a central point, that you don’t have go anywhere else , you don’t have to listen to the radio or watch television, or newspapers; you just came to Montefiore canteen, there were lots of organisations used to be there; everyone would come for lunch, or for a meeting or an event in the evening. That’s where you get all the information, there was a sense of solidarity, of community, of belonging there. It has closed down, and people’s priority has also changed., people’s priority shifted from just being single person, just being community minded to their immediate family. And now people’s priority has shifted to trying to get best for their own family, in terms of housing, education health, you name it.. And I think lots of emphasis now are one individual family as well as trying to change things for the individual but at that time, more was about solidarity people were working collectively, it….used to happen. But it doesn’t mean that there is less solidarity among the Bangladeshi now. For instance the ongoing campaign of Cross Rail., when people feel threaten, it still doesn’t matter where they are living, They will unite behind a force. Solidarity is there and will remain, but it will take different shape and different form with the time and the changing nature of our society or our community.

It is true, the work facility is there, earlier there was those restaurants; people used to be able to spend time, talk, find information, it was not just for leisure, it was everything, leisure, social as well as political and economic; everything used to be addressed to there. But now there aren’t that many facilities available but obviously there are some community centres. (At the) End of the day solidarity is there.

**Q: In 1971 there was a mass radicalisation of the youth because of community organisations. Do you think there is a de-politicisation of the younger generation of Bangladeshis because there is a lack of community organisations?**

I don’t think so, I think it’s a different time, different circumstances, and things were then were with a different base because, first it was a spontaneous result from one particular event of Altab Ali, so there was …sense of shock, sense of anger; people responded. And if you look at that time, there was very low level of literacy among young and old, very few people were working as professionals. So only way we can articulate our need was by being present in a meeting or a demonstration, where as now the same thing can happen behind a desk. We have doctors, we have engineers, we have barristers, in different professionals; so same sort of things are happening but at a different level. The same is true with the politics as well; lots of people are joining mainstream political parties. I remember in late 1980s we wanted to have; we thought it is important for us to be represented in the council chamber, and therefore wanted local Bengali councillors. No political party will buy the idea, so we thought the only way to do it is to put a pressure on them, and the best way to put pressure on them is to put independent Bengali candidate. I was involved with it, I remember we had couple of meetings at the Robert Montefiore Centre; from there we set up a small committee. I was part of the committee, the aim was; anyone interested in becoming a member of the council, should express their interest and these are the people who will go through the election process and select people. I was one of the members.. We set up meetings for several evenings at the Shahid Bhavan at Fournier Street which is the headquarters of the Bangladesh Welfare Association, to select people. We put some candidates (forward), and the one that we got elected was Nurul Haq, the other two candidates came quite close to winning. One was Belal, who became a Labour councillor later on, and Syed Nurul Islam who was a member of Liberal Party. We put this candidate and Labour Party was under tremendous pressure, at the following elections they started to nominate our people, Bangladeshi candidate named Ashik Ali was nominated as the only one Bangladeshi candidate. But the next election they put forward lots of Bangladeshi and lots of them were elected. This was the result of our pressure, and because Labour Party put forward Bangladeshi men, we had no need to put our own independent candidates and by that time lots of us joined the Labour Party, you have an opportunity to seek nomination of Labour Party and the party was convinced that the Bangladeshi candidates were equally viable to represent the Labour……party to give an opportunity to a candidate who can represent the local population and local population happened to be significantly Bangladeshi as well.

I think politics has changed now, people are responding to it at different level and different way; I don’t totally agree, that people has been deskilled; because the circumstances is totally complex now. If you look at the mainstream as well, in 1970s and 1980s, we used to have almost on every weekend, huge CND demonstrations about nuclear weapons, about peace demonstration, we don’t have those things now, are you going to say that everybody has become de-politicised? No, when the need arrives, look at the demonstration against the invasion of Iraq, millions of people came; who were those people? Some of those was old CND people, anti-war people; they thought this is the time for us to go there, then they were perfectly well aware that we might not change, but at least I want to be there to say that, “I was there and I have registered my name”. I remember, we spent two hours, moving about less then half a mile, then I gave up with my son and daughter and I said, “Enough is enough, we can go now and rightly claim, that we were there” .The next Sunday when there was a huge photograph of the spot where we were standing we said, “Look that is the spot we were standing , and you can keep this cutting of The Observer and say that that’s where we stood ”. Doesn’t matter whether Blair or Bush has listened to us or not, I know I was there on that day in that particular spot.

So I think this is just the shift of priority, and I think to an extent, things are happening differently but also to an extent quite effectively in some valuable way. It will be wrong to value 1978 as more important then today.

Our Foreparents who came here, they had their own way of dealing with things, which was good. They did it their way, so things will change, people will change to the circumstances and will find the appropriate mean to approach it. That’s what is happening and that should happen. We are dealing with what we used to deal on the top end of Brick Lane on Sunday mornings, its happening in the evenings at the Council Chambers, happening at the House of Lords. Though we don’t have a member of Parliament at least we have a Bangladeshi representative present in the House of Lords. This is happening at that level. Likewise it is happening at the civil service level. It would have been unimaginable in 1978, to conceive of what we have today in 2006, we will have one of the top civil servant, at the High Commission representing her Majesty’s government in Bangladesh as their representative. So things have changed, it is happening at that level. Politics has become much (more) sophisticated, Bangladeshis are also responding at the same level as well and I think, you should look at the list of the council candidates at this particular local election. There is enough interest among the young local people, and most of the candidates are young people. But you will find people always talk, became bit nostalgic we think, our time was the best time. We all do this. This you people will talk the same thing ten or twenty years later.

If you go to our fore-parents, people will say, British time was the best; the next generation will say the Pakistan time was the best; so it gets a bit nostalgic but every period is important and people at that time play the role what is appropriate for that particular time. It is not right to draw a parallel but recognise them and except them at their time.

**Q: What is the biggest change that you have seen so far?**
As a community, lot has changed; most significant one is the economic change. If you look at the information (on) social deprivation, you will find the Bangladeshi community, not only in Tower Hamlets but through out the country, is the most deprived community (in the UK). But within that context we have got strong economic power now as well. If you look at the houses and the cars and businesses and things like that. Things have changed, the same with education as well. There was a time, you would find Bangladeshis probably not going onto formal education but leaving schools without any qualifications what so ever. And not going on for further education, now you will find lots of people continuing the education and not only that, going to good universities as well. So education and the economic power of the community has changed and that is something quite admirable.