

The Spirit of '71: how the Bangladeshi War of Independence has haunted Tower Hamlets.

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abstract

In 1971 Bengalis in Britain rallied en masse in support of the independence struggle that created Bangladesh. This study explores the nature and impact of that movement, and its continuing legacy for Bengalis in Britain, especially in Tower Hamlets where so many of them live. It looks at the different backgrounds and politics of those who took part, how the war brought them together and politicised new layers, and how the dictates of 'popular frontism' and revolutionary 'stages theory' allowed the radical socialism of the intellectual leadership to become subsumed by nationalism. And it examines how the mobilisation in 1971 played its part in the formation of Bengali links with the Labour Party and the development of a pragmatic town hall politics; and how its shadow still falls on the community today.

This history, which has largely been put together here from interviews with those who took part, has previously been little recorded outside a few personal memoirs in Bengali, and is a powerful story in its own right. It also provides a detailed example of the impact of international socialist developments on the evolution of politics among immigrants in a key period that saw decolonisation and nation-forming in their place of origin, and settlement and consolidation in Britain.

(Length 8000 words)

keywords

Bengali

Bangladesh

Tower Hamlets

independence war

nationalism

socialism

popular front

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On January 8th 1972 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was declared president of the liberated nation of Bangladesh - in London. Although his presence in the city had been decided by the Pakistan government, it did serve to acknowledge the rôle played by *probashi*, or emigrant Bengalis¹, who had rallied en masse in support of the independence struggle. This was a defining moment for East Bengal, as it ended its 24-year existence as East Pakistan to become a new nation, but it was also a watershed for the British Bengalis. This study explores the nature and impact of the independence movement, and its continuing legacy for Bengalis in Britain, especially in Tower Hamlets where so many of them live. It looks at the different backgrounds and politics of those who took part, how the war brought them together and politicised new layers, and how the dictates of 'popular frontism' and revolutionary 'stages theory' allowed the radical socialism of the intellectual leadership to become subsumed by nationalism. And it examines how the mobilisation in 1971 played its part in the formation of Bengali links with the Labour Party and the development of a pragmatic town hall politics; and how its shadow still falls on the community today.

This history, which has largely been put together here from interviews with those who took part, has previously been little recorded outside a few personal memoirs in Bengali, and is a powerful story in its own right. It also provides a detailed example of the impact of international socialist developments on the evolution of politics among immigrants in a key period that saw decolonisation and nation-forming in their place of origin, and settlement and consolidation in Britain. While there have been many accounts that give details of communist and socialist involvement in immigrant organisations, they have not been set within a wider ideological context. Kalbir Shukra has given a criticism from within the left

of later ideological developments, but she does not submit this period to the same level of contextual analysis.²

The political background

At the centre of this account, communist internationalists can be found sharing a common platform with bourgeois nationalists. This seemingly unlikely combination has occurred again and again, but the dynamic behind it (as behind the even more unlikely combination of the Socialist Workers' Party and the Muslim Association of Britain) can only be understood against the background of the development of Soviet communism. The fundamental issue for all concerned has been the nature of the socialist revolutionary process, and hence the correct strategy and tactics to be adopted. No brief survey of the debate this has generated could do it justice. In any real life situation the difference between success and failure could depend on crossing an imaginary tactical line, so the placing of that line becomes crucial, and the subject of intense argument both at the time and in subsequent analysis. This summary can only sketch out the main shifts of position: however its purpose is not to re-examine the whole debate. It is here to provide a framework to a detailed empirical examination of some of the ideas in action, and to allow that examination to be referred back to the wider issues.

In the theory of 'permanent revolution' Trotsky argued that in order to achieve socialism, the workers could not rest once they had gained power and brought about democratic reform. If reactionary counter-revolutionary forces were not to be re-established, the workers' government would have to proceed immediately to socialist revolution – and that is what happened in 1917. However, the revolution then had to spread internationally. When this failed, the party under Stalin proclaimed the possibility of 'socialism in one country', and conveniently returned to the earlier idea of revolutionary stages theory - in which the socialist revolution was seen as separate from a previous bourgeois revolution. Those

fighting for independence in colonial countries were regarded as allies working towards the first stage.

The national question had long been seen as central to these debates. Lenin had argued that the communist ideal of peoples united in a free union meant supporting the fight for ‘the right of nations to self-determination’, and opposing all forms of national oppression, but not actively encouraging nationalism. What this meant in practice had to be worked out in the light of actual circumstances, but Lenin insisted that the nationalist struggle must always be subordinate to the revolutionary struggle for socialism, and he warned that, ‘[t]he bourgeoisie of the oppressed nations persistently utilise the slogans of national liberation to deceive workers’.³

Under Stalin, this warning was forgotten, as the Comintern instructed Communists everywhere to subordinate their programme and strategy to that of the bourgeois nationalists. However, following the catastrophic consequences of these policies in the Canton insurrection and Shanghai coup of 1927, when Chiang Kai-shek turned on the Chinese Communists and murdered them in thousands, this strategy of collaboration was turned on its head. For the next five years, under the influence of the new policy that became known as ‘class against class’, the Comintern refused even to work alongside other socialists.

After the dangers of this new position had been exposed by the fatal victory of the Nazis in Germany in 1933, it was abandoned in its turn in favour of another complete tactical reversal. Ignoring the middle route of remaining ideologically and organisationally independent but working with others on particular issues (in what Trotsky called a ‘united front’), the party reverted right back to the ideas that had proved so disastrous in China, and called for a popular front of workers’ parties and those of the ‘progressive’ bourgeois. Although it was portrayed as a response to the immediate threat of fascism, popular frontism continued to be pursued after the war and gained a permanent place in Soviet

Communist theory. The post-war years also saw the general adoption of the idea that the second stage – the change from bourgeois democracy to socialism - could be achieved peacefully through a parliamentary road, without destroying the structural framework of the bourgeois state. The objection that these ideas laid any progress open to an inevitable revisionist backlash was rejected, and they became the new orthodoxy among communists and their sympathisers across the world, proving especially influential in the radical and anti-imperial movements of the old colonial countries, such as East Pakistan - modern Bangladesh.

The people

This was the wider political background, but what of those who were to translate those politics into action? At that time, there were some 22,000 people of East Bengali origin living in Britain, of whom around 3,000 lived in the East End.⁴ They were mainly men of little formal education whose most important qualification was an overbearing will to do better in life. They were ex-seamen from Sylhet in the north-east corner of what was then East Pakistan, who had perhaps jumped ship in British ports, or men from the seamen's families and villages many of whom had come to this country under the work voucher scheme brought in when immigration was restricted by the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act. And they earned a living in the rag trade, as unskilled labourers or hotel kitchen porters, and in the growing number of 'Indian' restaurants.⁵ They were generally here to work and make enough money to return to their families in Sylhet with their future prosperity assured, and for the most part, they kept their heads down and worked - hard. The community was focused on the mosque, the Pakistan Welfare Association, which started out as a self-help group in 1952, and various Bengali-owned cafés and restaurants, which had become established meeting places. But there were also a number of men of more educated background, such as Tasadduk Ahmed who came to Britain in 1953 in search of a more liberal climate in which to propound his communist politics, and whose Ganges Restaurant became a centre of political debate; and there was a significant

population of highly politicised Bengali students at London University, many of whom found in Tasadduk a political guide, and in the East End a practical outlet for their social consciences. The most immediate impact of the independence struggle in Britain was to bring Bengalis of different backgrounds more firmly together and politicise new layers of people.

Pakistani Politics in London

For the early Bengali immigrants in the thirties and forties, the dominant political movement had been for independence from Britain. Following Pakistani independence, British Bengali politics remained focused on what had become East Pakistan - and especially its relationship with the West Pakistani dominated government in Islamabad. For most immigrant groups, their first political concerns involve the politics of their homeland and issues immediately connected with immigration to Britain. For the Bengalis, the two subjects were intimately connected, especially when the government in Islamabad put initial restrictions on East Pakistani emigration.

Through the fifties and sixties the rising tide of East Pakistani politics caused ripples on the shores of the Thames. News of distant events was spread through Bengali language newspapers, and by those who had taken part, especially students; other actions affected the London men directly, such as the prejudice against Bengalis shown by the Pakistani High Commission. And sometimes events occurred on their doorsteps, as when Bhashani, the 'Red Maulana', spent a year in political exile in London between 1954 and 55. Bhashani could be described as combining within himself much of the idealism and many of the contradictions of Bengali radicalism. As a peasant leader he had developed an overwhelming, but untheorised, class-consciousness, which resonated with his egalitarian interpretation of Islam.⁶ At the time of his exile, he was president of the Awami League, the Bengali political party that was to dominate the first years of

Bangladeshi independence, but, before the end of the decade, a power struggle was to force him out of the party along with others of the more radical left, with whom he formed the National Awami Party, or NAP (pronounced 'nap').⁷

In London, Bhashani joined Tasadduk in staying with Abdul Mannan, ex-seaman and pioneering immigrant and café owner, who was already an active figure in community organisation. Tasadduk recalled to Caroline Adams that Abdul Mannan's house in Kensington and his *Green Mask* restaurant in Earls Court became central meeting places for 'all the political exiles of Pakistan' and '29 St Mary Abbott's Terrace was the centre, in one sense, of opposition politics in Pakistan'.⁸ Despite his association with the left, however, Bhashani appears to have established no legacy of any sort of developed left politics in London, except perhaps in the person of Tasadduk who had worked with him back in East Pakistan. While the 'Red Maulana' was undoubtedly a charismatic leader, he portrayed no clear-cut ideological message.

Students, workers and businessmen

Crucial to the development of London Bengali politics was the role of the small intellectual élite, many of them students and young professionals, who had learnt their own politics in the persecuted left and nationalist movements of their native Bengal. Their sincere commitment to radical change, though heavily influenced by Marxist ideas, reflected their roots as members of rural landowning families, operating according to traditional patriarchal networks. Class analysis was generally less important to them than a sense of fairness that can be seen as a natural extension of patriarchal and religious duty, and which combined easily with popular front politics.

One of these students was Nurul Islam, who played a prominent rôle in British Bengali politics in the late fifties and sixties and has since written a history of the immigration.⁹ He came to London in 1956 after graduating from Dhaka

University, and got a job as a railway clerk to support himself while he trained to be a barrister in Lincoln's Inn. He remembers going to meetings of around fifteen young students in a house in north London, where Tasadduk would tell them 'it's no good going for capitalism, and what's the good of becoming this barrister and solicitors, and you want to exploit people?.. rather educate yourself, read Marx, Engels, Rousseau, Voltaire, Mazzini, go for Tolstoy and *War and Peace*...' And he recalls that he used to give part of his weekly wage packet to the Pakistan Welfare Association.

Tasadduk had been responsible for putting the fledgling Welfare Association on a firm footing when he became office secretary in 1953, shortly after his arrival in England. He was a man of almost as many contradictions as his mentor Bhashani: a landowner's son who became a passionate communist, he retained an aristocratic mien, ran a successful restaurant, championed small businesses, and was honoured by being made Member of the British Empire he had so derided.¹⁰ Welfare work is the staple of immigrant organisation, and Tasadduk saw his work for the Welfare Association as a way of raising people's political consciousness. He was, in his own words, and in line with his Communist Party training in popular front politics, using 'non-political organisations for political ends', whilst 'keeping my own belief to myself and to my close associates'.¹¹ Thus, he and others were able to mobilise large numbers of people over major issues of concern to the community, and encourage political involvement more generally; but their socialism remained too deeply submerged in the other activities to make a lasting impact.

Another regular participant in Tasadduk's discussion groups was Shah Lutfur Rahman, who came to the LSE as a law student in the late fifties, having been involved in 'bits and pieces' of politics in Dhaka.¹² He began his life-long involvement with the East End Bengalis after being introduced to the community by 'a young Irish lady' who offered to show him 'what South Asia is' following a political discussion in the student common room.¹³ In 1959 Shah took his turn as

office secretary for the Welfare Association, where he would spend Sunday mornings helping his illiterate compatriots write letters home and fill in official forms, but he, too, kept overt politics and welfare work separate so as not to be accused of ulterior motives.

Sheikh Mannan also came to Britain as a student, arriving in 1964. He remembers that left-wingers dominated Pakistani student politics in London, and about 200 students – almost all Bengali - came together to form the Pakistan Democratic Front.¹⁴ In the late sixties, universities were, of course, alive with left politics, but Bengali radicalism had its own hard-fought history, dating back well before Pakistani Independence.¹⁵ Sheikh Mannan had rapidly arrived at his own political awakening as a young teenager in post-partition Dhaka, where he saw the old Hindu élite being replaced by a new, predominantly West Pakistani, Muslim one.

Through the sixties, the Bengali left became increasingly fractured, reflecting events internationally. The idea of ‘socialism in one country’ had legitimated a new nationalism and competition between the bureaucracies of different Stalinist countries, leading to the Sino-Soviet split in 1964. The Maoists had their own international supporters, who were themselves further split along tactical lines. Sheikh Mannan, who followed the line of the pro-Moscow section of a divided NAP, claims that the majority of the students shared his pro-Moscow sympathies;¹⁶ Shah followed a pro-Peking faction of the Communist Party and Nurul Islam remained loyal to the Awami League. Sheikh Mannan recalls that Tasadduk’s discussions brought together all shades of left opinion.

Nurul Islam found that in London (as in Pakistan) the students had taken on a new political importance when Pakistan came under martial law in 1958: ‘We said, we are free. Nobody can do anything to us here. It is our responsibility to shout, to tell the people of the world, to create public opinion, international

opinion, what is happening in Pakistan; because Ayub Khan and the martial law people chucked out all the journalist'.¹⁷

Nurul Islam regarded the older, more established immigrants as the students' 'patrons', who, remembering earlier political campaigns, financed their politics, paying for such necessary expenses as printing and hiring meeting halls. It should be stressed, however, that while there was a receptiveness to the political demands that were made of the community, the level of political understanding was generally low. The Bengalis' rural roots were not suited to nurturing a more developed politics, and many of them were poorly educated or even illiterate. Nurul Islam suggests that attendance at public meetings was partly due to the lack of other forms of recreation, and he acknowledges that even in the late sixties 'there was hardly anything like communist or socialist education among the ordinary people'.¹⁸ Although some restaurant owners, such as Abdul Mannan, came to Tassaduk's discussion groups, Shah held no illusions about the majority of his fellow Bengalis. He found that they often had to work 'from 6 o'clock in the morning until 11 o'clock at night' (like many immigrants) and 'their horizon of life was extremely limited'.¹⁹ His social work was politically 'unproductive' until the arrival of a younger generation of dependents in the mid sixties, though it was some years before there was a significant number of young people. For many people the students' politics were anyway too radical. Shah recounted that when they sold their bulletin *Purbo Bangla* (East Bengal),

Lots of people didn't like it, they used to think we are fifth columnists, we are communists... lots of people opposed us, saying we are for the disintegration of Pakistan... Pakistan was a genuine aspiration of the Muslim of India.²⁰

In Shah's view, the politically conscious students acted as 'catalysts' in bringing about the mobilisation of other Bengalis. He commented:

The politicisation of the Bengalis... didn't happen due to the East End of London per se, it happened because some students and intelligentsia from the Bengali community, who were in various Universities, started taking interest in the Bengali Community in the East End of London, particularly in relationship to the movement against exploitation [by] Pakistan.²¹

The students brought a wider political analysis, and administrative and professional skills, and had time that was not available to most of the hard-working immigrants.

It seems that while memories of earlier movements may have made the community relatively receptive to political ideas, they had left little legacy of grass roots organisation. Now, though, another generation of activists and new political events were pulling Bengalis together. The symbiotic political relationship between the students and the growing Bengali business class was exemplified by the establishment of East Pakistan House in Highbury in 1964. The initial inspiration had come from the students and activists, but the house, which combined the functions of student hostel and centre for Bengali political activity, was largely financed and run by the restaurant owners. Shah recalled that although ultimately generous, they were (unsurprisingly) initially cautious.²² In 1969, when Sheikh Mujib was accused of plotting with India for the secession of East Pakistan, the activists and restaurateurs around East Pakistan House raised political consciousness and sufficient money from the Bengali business community to send a British QC to Pakistan to speak in his defence.

Mass mobilisation

The events of 1971 galvanised the *probashi* Bengali community, and left it not only with a new relationship to its homeland, but a new political awareness overall. The trigger was the election in Pakistan.

On 7th December 1970, after twelve years of dictatorship, Pakistanis went to the polls; but before the elections finally took place, East Pakistan was hit by a cyclone and tidal wave that left over a million dead. The inaction of the West Pakistan based authorities in the face of this calamity drove a further wedge between them and the Bengalis. In Britain, collections were made for emergency relief. Donations were raised by the National Federation of Pakistani Associations and by the East London Mosque,²³ students organised meetings and everyone gave money or clothes or what they could, as though in preparation for the mass mobilisation around the independence struggle.

The Awami League provided a focus for Bengali election hopes, with a programme that included East Pakistani autonomy. Other Bengali opposition groups boycotted the elections or were marginalized,²⁴ and the League won 160 of East Pakistan's 162 directly elected seats. Since seats were allocated in proportion to population and East Pakistanis outnumbered West, this gave them an overall majority in the National Assembly.²⁵ But the West Pakistani leaders would not accept an Awami League government and its consequences. Meetings between the key players achieved nothing; meanwhile Pakistani troops were made ready and Bengali patience was tested to the limit. On March 1st 1971, it was announced that the National Assembly session would be postponed, and people poured into Dhaka's streets. On 7th March, Sheikh Mujib, leader of the Awami League, responding to mass demands, declared to a crowd of a million that the struggle now was for complete emancipation and independence.

Back in London, in those first days of March, the main Pakistani student hostel in Chesham Place was a ferment of discussion. Sheikh Mannan, then president of the left-wing Pakistan Democratic Front, tried without success to keep the few West Pakistanis on board.²⁶ The students listened to Mujib's speech broadcast by the BBC on the radio in the hostel, and student activists called an immediate demonstration outside the Pakistan High Commission. Sheikh Mannan recalls that the majority of the crowd were East End Bengalis 'from various walks of life', who had also been anxiously following events in Pakistan since the election. Some of them also spoke to the crowd and stayed on with the students until three in the morning. For the students 'normal life was suspended' and days and nights were taken up in endless discussions and leaflet writing as they waited for directives for action from Bengal. There were meetings of Bengali doctors and Bengali women, and wherever groups of Bengalis had settled, people met to discuss and speculate and plan what they could do.²⁷

In Dhaka, negotiations between the key players finally broke down on 24th March, and that night the Pakistani army launched its crackdown, with an orgy of violence that left thousands of innocent people dead and turned even apolitical Bengalis into fervent nationalists. In Britain, meetings were held everywhere and action committees were springing up all over the country. There was an overwhelming desire to do something in response to the news coming out from Bengal and the terrible experiences relayed in letters from family and friends still there. Of course, a few retained their old loyalties to Pakistan, but most people's reactions were similar to those of Nawab Ali, whose swashbuckling adventures are recorded in Caroline Adams' collection of oral histories:

I supported Bangladesh struggle too, [as well as Pakistan's fight for independence from Britain,] not immediately of course because we fought to make Pakistan, so we didn't want to lose it, but when we saw the newspapers, the photographs of what they had done to Bengali women, then

we supported it. Eight of my family were in the *Mukti...*²⁸
[*Mukti Bahini* translates as Liberation Army.]

Organising the British Bengalis into a coherent group was not easy – with all the usual problems that make up the realities of political struggle. There were the personal rivalries and traditional bonds that form the staple fare of accounts of community politics,²⁹ but there were also the much less discussed but fundamental ideological differences between many of the leading activists. Rivalries within the Awami League had resulted in two organisations, each claiming to be the official British section. However, beyond this the left groups envisaged a very different Bangladesh from that planned by the Awami League. Although most of the left worked together with the League and non-aligned groups, there was still underlying tension and mistrust.

Sheikh Mannan recalls a turbulent organisational history. After the first attempt at a co-ordinating council foundered, a fractious meeting in Spitalfields of Bengalis from all over the country agreed to hold a further convention in Coventry. This took place on the 24th April. Lulu Bilquis Banu described the meeting to Caroline Adams:

They wanted someone to preside over the conference, so as soon as someone's name was proposed, the others shouted, "No, no, no, he's a thief, he's a swindler, he is so and so". [Then someone suggested asking Mrs Banu]... and I said "Don't be silly, in this pandemonium I am going to preside? They are breaking the chairs, hitting each other", there was so much animosity... [But she was persuaded to try.]... And they all clapped... there was absolute calm, not one protest, because I was absolutely non political, non partisan...³⁰

She was also one of the few women present, and it would have been disrespectful to challenge her.

The convention produced a national steering committee of five, including Sheikh Mannan, who much of the time acted as convener. He recalls that none of the five were paid up members of the Awami League. This committee coordinated the campaign, but was also supposed to give birth to a bigger central committee, and its failure to do so provided the basis for an attempted take over by one of the Awami League groups, who adopted the simple expedient of entering the steering committee office en masse.³¹ Also, at a London level, attempts to unite the capital's fourteen different committees under one London leadership did not succeed for long. However, most of the different groups across the country were fundamentally working under the steering committee umbrella.

The only significant group outside this umbrella consisted of the followers of the pro-Peking sections of the divided Communist Party, who organised separately after the Coventry convention. They took directions from their leaders in East Bengal and produced their own paper, *Gono Juddho*, People's War, which they sent to universities all over the world. As well as rejecting popular frontism, they argued that socialism in East Pakistan would not be achieved under the leadership of the democratically organised workers movement of Marxist theory, but through a peasants' revolution in the Maoist pattern.

For the majority – including supporters of the Awami League, all the Moscow-orientated groups, and Bashani's Peking-orientated NAP - the overall leadership question was resolved by bringing in an external authority figure. Abu Sayid Chowdhury, Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University and a Judge of the Dhaka High Court, had been attending an international convention in Geneva when hostilities broke out, and he agreed to take on the role provided the different groups could settle their differences. Justice Chowdhury was later made Ambassador Plenipotentiary by the Bangladesh Government in Exile in Calcutta,

and ensured the committee kept to a moderate line. It was also agreed that the trustees for the Bangladesh Fund should be Justice Chowdhury and two neutral non-Bengalis – Donald Chesworth and John Stonehouse. Despite Stonehouse's later history (he was convicted of financial fraud after attempting to fake his own suicide), the Bengali consensus is that Stonehouse's role in 1971 was genuinely disinterested and honest.³² Chesworth was chairman of War on Want and had an established record of work in East Bengal.

Many of the factional differences had their roots back in Bengal, but Bengali village links could play a more positive part when it came to raising crowds at demonstrations. Then the different leaders could each expect to bring a following based on traditional ties,³³ and the competitive element served to boost overall numbers.

The British committees had two main tasks: propaganda and fundraising. They wanted to mobilise the whole Bengali community – and Sheikh Mannan remembers canvassing 'every single house and flat'. He avoided pushing a political line and spoke only for liberation.³⁴ Ideology was generally relegated to journals and newspapers. Like other immigrants and exiles before them, the Bengalis realised the strategic value of London as a centre of wider public pressure.³⁵ To this end they organised demonstrations, lobbied MPs, party conferences and trade unions, and sent letters and advertisements to British newspapers. They also sent speakers to international meetings.

Every use was made of those who could bear witness to the scenes of devastation in Bengal. Aziz Choudhury arrived in London in October after his political mentor, Pir Habibur Rahman of the pro-Moscow NAP, had told him to go and tell people what was happening, and a Bengali passport official had taken his life in his hands to issue him a student passport back-dated to before they were banned.³⁶ He travelled round England talking to members of the Bengali community:

When they can hear from somebody who just came from Bangladesh, [it] was completely different... I was at gunpoint twice, so that gave people more courage to participate more, contribute more for the country...³⁷

Fundraising galvanized the community and produced a sum of around half a million pounds, as everyone scraped together what they could.³⁸ Ali Syed Goyas, now a member of the Toynbee Hall Pensioners Club, then lived with his father in Birmingham. By careful housekeeping they had managed to survive on his father's £8 a week wage, allowing him to put aside the whole of the £25 he earned from night-time piecework in a car factory to send to the family back home. When war broke out he had just left his young pregnant wife in East Pakistan, and for months there was no news of her or his mother and brother. He had £528 saved in the bank and he gave it all to the Bangladesh fund.³⁹

Goyas had joined the Awami League in East Pakistan in 1969, when he had returned home for a period and got married, but for many it was the war that first brought them into any kind of political activity. Abdul Razzak, another member of the Toynbee Club, was then working nights in a Bradford wool mill. He had never previously been part of any political or community organisation, but in 1971, on Saturday mornings, when he finished work, he would have breakfast and join the coach taking Bradford Bengalis to the London demonstrations. And Razzak too became a member of the Awami League.⁴⁰

This was also the moment of political awakening for Alhaj Shams Uddin, who came to Britain in 1963, and is now president of the UK branch of the Jatiya Party. He explains: 'That time ... everybody is more politically growing up, because before, nobody's interested any much politics.'⁴¹

Despite the cross-class nature of the movement, some restaurant workers had to risk their jobs to demonstrate. Commercial interests triumphed as their Bengali bosses forbade them to leave work and join the protests, and occasionally even threatened to expose them as illegal immigrants.⁴²

There were as yet relatively few women among the East End Bengalis,⁴³ and those there were would have been restrained by tradition from taking part in public actions. But there was a very busy, if small, women's movement among the educated middle class, whose activities ranged from fundraising to public speaking in Trafalgar Square. Shah Lutfur Rahman's wife, Munni, was a leading member of the women's association and Sheikh Mannan's wife, Rosie, attended the demonstrations when she could find a lift for herself and her three-year-old twins.

Money collected was used for administration, travel expenses and publicity, and some was sent for relief work, but the original hope of many of the organisers, and probably the majority of the donors, was that it would be used to buy arms for the *Mukti Bahini*, who were operating out of India. Plans for direct aid to the fighting were immediately crushed by the Indian government. Sheikh Mannan explains, 'High hopes were raised, and everybody was thinking that his or her money was buying arms. But... when we contacted the Indian High Commission, we were met with a blank refusal...' The excuse was given that the sums collected were too small for modern warfare:

...the old man sat and laughed... He said, "Young man, how much money do you have?"... I said, "The more weapons we send the more money will come from the pockets of our people." Then he said, "How big is the pocket?..."⁴⁴

Undaunted, Sheikh Mannan and some of his colleagues contacted a man who had been in the Pakistani navy who said he could supply small arms privately. He produced a sample bomb, which they tested in the hills outside Cheltenham in the early hours of the morning. But when they confronted Justice Chowdhury with their plans he was appalled:

He banged his head against the table. He said, “Of all the people, you did go to do this thing. You have frustrated me, you have disappointed me and you have crushed me. How on earth the British government will allow it? And if they know tomorrow that you have done this, my existence in this country will be threatened. The whole movement overseas will be stopped. Why did you do that?”

Justice Chowdhury also contacted the government in exile in Calcutta to ask that General Osmani and others stop undermining his authority by sending direct requests for arms to individuals.⁴⁵ The bulk of the money was finally handed over to the new Bangladesh government after the war, and was used to help set up the state bank.⁴⁶

The British Bengalis had realised the limits of their power to influence events. There were boundaries to what a non-governmental group could legally do, and they bowed to the pressures from international forces. This setback also damaged the credibility and strength of the organisation in London, as Sheikh Mannan had told Justice Chowdhury it would. Mannan later observed that ‘the amount of money coming every week was so encouraging, but when they heard that no weapons are sent, the flow stopped’.⁴⁷

The legacy of the popular front

In analysing the long-term impact of the mobilisation around 1971, it is crucial to examine the effect of the popular front policies pursued by the left groups who took a leading role. Despite the far-left origins of many of the Bengali activists, especially in the sixties and around 1971, and despite persistent attempts at recruitment by British Marxist groups, the community has remained largely resistant to the growth of any active radical socialist movement. The local Communist Party – though itself hardly very radical - still had councillors in Tower Hamlets up until 1971. But it failed to apply the lessons of its own interwar grass-roots activism and get the Bengalis involved with its work in Tower Hamlets. So, besides welfare work, Bengali political experiences were generally limited to the independence struggle; and because that struggle (and also the welfare work) was carried out in line with popular front politics, it left no room for the development of independent socialist ideas and organisation.

In 1971, in accordance with popular front and stages theory, the majority of Bengalis, in Pakistan and in Britain, put aside their political differences to fight together for freedom. Sheikh Mannan explains their position:

Nationalism is a disease... But we were so much oppressed for 1000 years, that we needed the tag of nationalism first, otherwise you won't be able to convince the people... we thought that let us achieve liberation and ... immediately after liberation we will split up, and then they will give their programme to the people, we will give our programme. If we succeed the government will be ours. That is how we work together... If the Awami League was the only party leading the liberation movement, both at home and in here as well, it would have failed.⁴⁸

As acting convenor of the steering committee he had to be ‘neutral’ and ‘not be bound by the party spirit, but by a nationalist spirit’. If he ever tried to put forward his political views, Justice Chowdhury would say to him, “Liberation first or your ideology first?”⁴⁹

Nurul Islam, who by this time was living back in East Pakistan but was sent to Europe for two months by the liberation command as a sort of ambassador for their cause, threw himself wholeheartedly behind Sheikh Mujib, ‘because the need of the hour is nationalism’. This did not mean that he rejected all the ideals of Tasadduk’s discussion groups: he believed in socialism and in the Awami League’s socialist rhetoric, but felt that this would be impossible without the liberation of East Pakistan from West.⁵⁰ The left’s popular front policies made such a transition to nationalism appear unproblematic.

Tasadduk’s personal involvement in the details of Mujib’s official declaration as president in Claridges Hotel epitomised popular front politics,⁵¹ but the Awami League would make few concessions to their left supporters as they claimed their mandate to rule the new nation, and Mujib had already made this clear to Sheikh Mannan and others before he departed Heathrow.⁵² Similarly, the left failed to benefit from the politicisation of the community in London. Most of the left leaders had been so busy propagating the cause of independence and avoiding anything that might discourage the broadest possible involvement, that Sheikh Mannan had to admit that:

People... were ignorant about the subtle difference between the Awami League and the National Awami Party. I would not categorise them as politically immature, but they are not thoroughly informed, because nobody took the message from Maulana Bhashani, [and] went into leather factories or in a restaurant, or in garment factories - wherever our

people worked... If we did go, which we did, we went for the cause of East Pakistan.⁵³

In fact, it can be argued that not only did the left fail to gain from the political mobilisation that accompanied Bangladeshi Independence, but they actually lost much of their earlier potential as the community's political leadership; though even before 1971, they had allowed their socialism to be eclipsed by general welfare activities.

In the British Bengali community, the left did not recover a separate identity. Away from the post-war devastation and disappointments, most Bengalis allowed themselves to enjoy the achievement of independence, and restricted their involvement in Bangladeshi politics to support of the Awami League - which cultivated the idea that the Party was synonymous with the independence movement - and later of the other parties that actually achieved power. Although London has seen echoes of three decades of political protest at events in Bangladesh, there have been no more all-embracing mass movements, and opinion and priorities have been divided. Meanwhile, the community has concentrated on its day-to-day struggles. The Bengalis' new public profile and familiarity with the British political system was put towards a pragmatic politics where the goal was a fair share of the existing system, and not changing the system itself.

I am not attempting to say that without the independence struggle the Bengali community would have developed a powerful socialist movement. What this history demonstrates is a particularly effective example of the impact of socialist developments that effected immigrant politics everywhere. And the new ideologies of identity politics that evolved out of popular frontism, were to influence developments further. The 'black radicalism' of the 1970s ended, not in the radical change of its rhetoric, but in the defence of different constituencies within the political mainstream.⁵⁴ British Bengali politics conforms to the wider pattern,⁵⁵ and the freedom struggle was a movement through which socialist views

could have received a growing acceptance, had those who held them not submitted themselves to a policy of self-censorship in line with the prevailing left orthodoxy.

1971 and the Labour Party

At the same time as popular front politics made the left leaders receptive to working with mainstream political parties, politicisation through the Bangladeshi independence struggle brought many British Bengalis into contact with the British Labour Party. 1971 helped build the foundations of the community's long and increasingly intimate relationship with Labour politics.⁵⁶ Ideologically, as explained by Peter Shore, former MP for Stepney where many of the Bengalis lived, 'There was a feeling of some considerable overlap of values and outlook between the Awami League and the Labour Party'.⁵⁷ And practically, the parliamentary party was seen as providing an important channel for promoting Bengali views. Recollections of the period all acknowledge the part played by a number of Labour MPs, who kept up pressure on the Conservative government to support Bangladesh. Shore told me:

I found myself very quickly and deeply involved, and I mean really wholeheartedly involved. It's difficult quite to explain... I was outraged frankly by what had happened; and I was... better informed really than probably most people in British politics, because so many of my constituents gave me sort of first hand accounts of what their families and relatives were enduring.⁵⁸

His contribution was acknowledged officially in Bangladesh by the new government, and in London by 'an ongoing and very close relationship with the community, and indeed with their leaders'. Personal support for Peter Shore extended to his reselection battle, when he was challenged by Jill Cove from the left in the mid eighties. (There was also a Bengali candidate, but Cove was seen as

the main rival contender.) Of course some Bengalis chose to support those who they saw as more progressive, but Shore observed, ‘There was no question of the Bengali[s] as a group, as it were, being turned against myself or in favour of anyone else.’⁵⁹

Once the community had discovered this useful channel to power and a new political assertiveness, they made increasing use of them, keeping their constituency MP busy with all the problems that beset an immigrant community in a poor neighbourhood. The developing links were encouraged by the new phase of immigration that started after the war and turned the focus of future hopes increasingly towards Britain. The early seventies saw a significant increase in the number of Bengali wives and families coming over to join the men already in Britain. This was partly a response to the tightening of immigration controls in ’71, which generated fears of further restrictions, but was also spurred by the traumas of separation and uncertainty that accompanied the war, and by the chaos of post-war devastation. By the beginning of the eighties, a younger generation was ready to take a more directly active part in local Labour politics.⁶⁰

The Bengalis were following a standard immigrant route in finding a political home in the Labour party; and the choice of Labour was, as they readily admit, highly pragmatic at a time when the party dominated the local town hall (Bengali Labour councillors interviewed 2000).⁶¹ However, I would suggest that the Bengalis’ experience, not only exemplifies wider immigrant history, but enabled their absorption into Labour politics to happen both quickly and thoroughly.

The legacy

Many of the post ’71 generation of East End activists were better educated than their fathers, and – unlike them – were generally committed to a future in this country. Often recent immigrants, they had few links with earlier political

activities in Britain (except through contacts such as Shah Lutfur Rahman), but they had lived through the birth of Bangladesh. Ansar Ahmed Ullah, who came to Britain in 1975 aged around 15, observes:

Many of us witnessed the war or saw the political movement before the war and were very much aware of political movements and what they can do in order to campaign for your rights... And they probably felt the same when they came here. They felt it's like *déjà vu*... We are being attacked, we can't get jobs, we're not given decent housing. As a Community we're kind of looked down [on], that kind of stuff.⁶²

These people were ready to fight for their place in Britain; and nationalist consciousness became subsumed into ethnic consciousness, which took practical form through the mechanisms of the local Labour Party.

By the beginning of this century, Tower Hamlets Bengali community could boast of a highly active civil society with (after the 2002 elections) a disproportionately high 28 of the borough's 51 councillors (22 of them Labour), and numerous community organisations. However, even before 9/11, the dominance of the secular nationalists was being increasingly challenged by the growing force of a revivalist Islam.⁶³ The generation that was radicalised in the shadow of 1971 are predominantly practicing Muslims, but believe that religious practice is a matter of personal choice and should be kept separate from politics. The Islamists argue that the separation of religion and politics is not possible because Islam encompasses every aspect of life. The Bengali secularists regard revivalist Islam as anti-progressive, and a source of division between Muslims and others. But both the intensity of their concern, and the nature of their response cannot be fully understood without reference to the history of Bangladeshi politics, and particularly to the violence of 1971.

Some have tried to promote a progressive secularism through the Nirmul Committee. This pressure group, set up by a Bangladeshi mother who lost her son in the war, campaigns for the punishment of war criminals, and advances the cultural values of the freedom movement. It argues that some of the Islamist leaders here and in Bangladesh were implicated in war crimes in 1971 and are using their position in the mosques as cover. Islamic parties, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, which has close links with the East London Mosque, opposed the division of Pakistan as contrary to the nation's founding principles as a state united by Islam. Pro-government Bengalis were armed and organised by the Pakistan Army, and among them, some used their local knowledge to perpetrate or facilitate some of the worst atrocities of the war.

The Nirmul Committee wants to help Bengali youth create a positive identity as British Bengalis, so as to win them away both from the embrace of revivalist Islam and from the trap of the East End's growing drug culture; but its own historical roots in the '71 war could make this more difficult. Ansar Ahmed Ullah, who is a committee member, confesses: 'Because [the] Nirmul Committee was fairly political in its make up it wasn't appealing to all the young people'⁶⁴ And his colleague, Sunahwar Ali, comments:

If you... talk to [the] younger generation [of] the Bengali community... if you say "what is '71, what's happened? There was war between Bangladesh and who?" [They will say] "Oh may be the British or something." People don't have a clue.⁶⁵

The Nirmul Committee's response to this is two-pronged. It tries to educate the younger generation about what did actually happen in '71, and it tries to attract them through Bengali culture. However, cultural politics cannot compete with the pull of Islam, which offers its followers the power of an overriding ideology, as well as a heroic history, international strength and brotherhood and

religious promises of future glory. In fact, the whole nature of Bengali political mobilisation, with its emphasis on community organisation and Labour Party links - in which, I have argued, the events of 1971 have played a part - has not helped those who want to see a progressive alternative to Islamism. To generate a real alternative with the force to command support would require a turn to a genuine socialism, which is not afraid to put forward its own radical ideological and practical agenda for change in an area notorious for its social deprivation.

Conclusion

Over the last thirty years, the spirit of '71 has taken many forms. This account has demonstrated the enormous impact on the community of the mass mobilisation at the time of Bangladeshi independence, and how it brought workers, businessmen and the educated élite together through a new political commitment. It has examined the importance of the political tensions that underlay the movement, and it has demonstrated how the ideas and tactics of Stalin's stages theory and popular frontism allowed more revolutionary socialist aims to be side-lined, in favour of the immediate demands of nationalism. It has also shown how this, along with the practical involvement of Labour MPs, helped cement Bengali links with the Labour Party and encourage the development of a pragmatic town-hall politics; and how many of the structures and ideas impacting on British Bengalis today, are imbued by the history of that time. It has provided a detailed empirical history of the effect of broader ideological developments in left politics on the political mobilisation of one of Britain's immigrant communities.

Recent events have opened a new chapter in British Bengali politics, but if, for the up-coming generation, the spirit of '71 is fading, this history still has important lessons. And this is especially true in the Bengali East End, where many who would describe themselves as socialists are now attempting to form a new popular front along-side fundamentally conservative Islamic groups.

acknowledgements

The research is based largely on interviews carried out between 2000 and 2003, and I would like to thank all those who gave me their time and shared their thoughts and experiences. I have also made use of earlier, mostly unpublished, interviews made by the late Caroline Adams, who had herself planned to write about this neglected, but still potent, history, and I would like to express my gratitude to her for leaving her irreplaceable collection of papers and tapes to Tower Hamlets Library for the use of future scholars. I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of Tony Cox, Richard Dennis, Claire Dwyer, my parents, and the reviewer for this journal. A shorter version of this paper was presented to the British Association for South Asian Studies conference in March 2001

endnotes

(All interviews were carried out by the author unless otherwise specified.)

¹ Most British Bengalis are happy to describe themselves as either Bengali or Bangladeshi, though some will use Bangladeshi to emphasise their distinction from Hindu West Bengalis, in line with President Zia's Islamicising constitutional changes of 1977. I have used Bengali so as to be able to use the same term when talking about East Pakistanis, before Bangladeshi independence.

² Kalbir Shukra, *The Changing Pattern of Black Politics in Britain*. (London, 1998)

³ VI Lenin, *Collected Works* Vol.22 (Moscow, 1964) pp.143-156

⁴ The overall figure (which includes around 1,000 British-born Bengalis) was calculated by Ceri Peach, in 'Estimating the growth of the Bangladeshi population of Great Britain' *New Community* 16(4) (1990). The 1971 census records 3,560 people born in Pakistan living in Tower Hamlets, but the great majority of these would have come from East Bengal. The 1981 census records 9,808 people in Tower Hamlets born in Bangladesh and only 657 born in Pakistan.

⁵ Yousuf Choudhury, *The Roots and Tales of the Bangladeshi Settlers* (Birmingham, 1993), and Caroline Adams, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers* (London, 1994, first published 1987)

⁶ Talukder Maniruzzaman 'Radical Politics and the Emergence of Bangladesh' in Paul Brass and Marcus Franda (eds) *Radical Politics in South Asia* (Cambridge Mass, 1973) pp.230-231

⁷ Lawrence Zirling *Bangladesh – From Mujib to Ershad: An Interpretative Study* (Karachi, 1992) pp.32-34

⁸ Tasadduk Ahmed, interviewed by Caroline Adams, 1980s

⁹ Nurul Islam *Probashir Kotha* (The Tale of the Immigrants) (Sylhet, 1989). Nurul Islam played a prominent role in British Pakistani organisations in the '60s before returning to East Pakistan for family reasons in 1966 and being detained there by the Pakistan government. He now runs the Bangladesh Overseas Centre in Sylhet. Nurul Islam was interviewed in London on 12th June 2001

¹⁰ Besides his campaigning and his work with Pakistani Welfare Associations across Britain, and in the production of journals for the immigrant community, Tasadduk was secretary of the National Association of Pakistani Caterers in the 1960s, and Chairman of the Spitalfields Small Business Association from its inception in 1979 until his stroke in 1998. He was given an MBE for his community work in 1989.

¹¹ Tasadduk Ahmed, interviewed by Caroline Adams, 1980s

¹² Shah Lutfur Rahman, interviewed 22nd August 2001

¹³ Shah Lutfur Rahman, interviewed 18th August 2001

¹⁴ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed 30th March 2002

¹⁵ Khizar Humayun Ansari *The Emergence of Socialist Thought among North Indian Muslims (1917-1947)* (Lahore, 1990), and Anthony Cox 'Paternal Despotism and Workers' Resistance in the Bengal Jute Industry, 1920 – 1940' University of Cambridge PhD (1999)

¹⁶ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed 30th March 2002

¹⁷ Nurul Islam, interviewed 12th June 2001

¹⁸ Nurul Islam, interviewed 12th June 2001

¹⁹ Shah Lutfur Rahman, interviewed 22nd August 2001

²⁰ Shah Lutfur Rahman, interviewed 22nd August 2001

²¹ Shah Lutfur Rahman, interviewed 18th August 2000

²² Shah Lutfur Rahman, interviewed 22nd August 2001

²³ *East London Express* 8th and 15th January 1971

²⁴ Bhashani and much of his pro-China NAP declared a boycott at the last minute, arguing that elections should not be held when people were still starving after the cyclone.

²⁵ 300 seats were directly elected and a further 13 reserved for women, of which the Awami League had 7.

²⁶ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed by Caroline Adams 19th March 1998

²⁷ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed by Caroline Adams 19th March 1998 and by the author 30th March 2002

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- ²⁸ Nawab Ali: transcript of interview by Caroline Adams, 1980s p.12
- ²⁹ John Eade *The Politics of Community: The Bangladeshi Community in East London* (Aldershot, 1989)
- ³⁰ Lulu Bilquis Banu, interviewed by Caroline Adams, 29th September 1990
- ³¹ This incident was recounted by Sheikh Mannan when interviewed by Tasadduk Ahmed and Caroline Adams, 1st April 1998. He was not present but has talked to numerous people who were.
- ³² See, for example, the tributes in the Awami League's *Silver Jubilee Commemorative Volume of Bangladesh Independence* (London, 1997). All cheques had to be signed by Justice Chowdhury.
- ³³ For a discussion of patronage links associated with Bengali patrilineages, see Katy Gardner *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Travel and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh* (Oxford, 1995)
- ³⁴ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed 30th March 2002
- ³⁵ Shah Lutfur Rahman, interviewed by the author 22nd August 2001, and Sheikh Mannan, interviewed by Caroline Adams 19th March 1998
- ³⁶ Aziz Choudhury, interviewed 30th January 2001. Habibur Rahman was a NAP leader and a distant cousin of Choudhury's.
- ³⁷ Aziz Choudhury, interviewed 20th February 2001
- ³⁸ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed by Caroline Adams 19th March 1998. This sum would be worth over £4m today.
- ³⁹ Ali Syed Goyas, interviewed 14th May 2001 (translated by Abul Kalam Azad)
- ⁴⁰ Abdul Razzak, interviewed 14th May 2001 (translated by Abul Kalam Azad)
- ⁴¹ Alhaj Shams Uddin, interviewed 6th March 2001
- ⁴² Sheikh Mannan, interviewed by Caroline Adams, 19th March 1998 and by the author, 30th March 2002
- ⁴³ Of the 3,560 people born in Pakistan and living in Tower Hamlets, recorded in the 1971 census, only 470 were female. At least 3,000 of these Pakistanis would have been from East Bengal.
- ⁴⁴ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed by Caroline Adams 19th March 1998

⁴⁵ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed by Caroline Adams 19th March 1998

⁴⁶ There are, inevitably, stories of money going astray – of individual fund raising that never made it to the bank, and even of local committees who did not submit their collections to the final accounts, but these are peripheral to our story. Charges against Stonehouse were investigated by the fraud squad, but no evidence was found.

⁴⁷ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed by Caroline Adams, 19th March 1998

⁴⁸ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed 30th March 2002

⁴⁹ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed by Tassaduk Ahmed and Caroline Adams, 1st April 1998

⁵⁰ Nurul Islam, interviewed 12th June 2001

⁵¹ Mahiuddin Ahmed recalled in a letter to the Bangladesh Observer in 1989: 'I was personal witness to the closeness between Tasadduq Bhai and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Tasadduq Bhai had almost developed a row with Anthony Mascarenhas [the *Sunday Times* journalist] on the 8th January '72 on the question of the security of the President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in Claridges Hotel.' (*Bhai*, brother, is a commonly used honorific.) Copy of manuscript letter in Spitalfields Small Business Association.

⁵² Sheikh Mannan, interviewed by Caroline Adams 19th March 1998

⁵³ Sheikh Mannan, interviewed 30th March 2002

⁵⁴ Shukra (1998)

⁵⁵ Sarah Glynn 'East End Immigrants and the Battle for Housing: a comparative study of political mobilisation in the Jewish and Bengali communities' *Journal of Historical Geography*, 13(3) (2005)

⁵⁶ John Eade 'Nationalism and the quest for authenticity: the Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets' *New Community*, 16(4) (1990) p.496

⁵⁷ Peter Shore, interviewed 15th February 2001

⁵⁸ See also Shore's message in the *Silver Jubilee Commemorative Volume of Bangladesh Independence* (1997) p.37

⁵⁹ The vote at the selection meeting, held 19th January 1986, was Peter Shore 46, Jill Cove 19, James McAllister 11 and Jan Alam 8.

⁶⁰ Eade (1989)

⁶¹ Bengali Labour councillors, interviewed in 2000

⁶² Ansar Ahmed Ullah, interviewed 14th November 2000

⁶³ John Eade, Isabelle Fremeaux and David Garbin 'The political construction of Diasporic Communities in the Global City' in P. Gilbert (ed) *Imagined Londons* (New York, 2002), and Sarah Glynn 'Bengali Muslims: the new East End radicals?' *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25(6) (2002) pp.969-988

⁶⁴ Ansar Ahmed Ullah, interviewed 14th November 2000

⁶⁵ Sunahwar Ali, interviewed 23rd January 2001