

## **Mr. Jamal Hasan**

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Interviewed by: Jamil Iqbal

Mr. Hassan currently works at Camden Community Law Centre. He was a community and youth worker in the East End from 1972 until 1981. He was also involved with the Bangladesh Welfare Association (BWA). He became secretary of the coalition organisation which staged the demonstration from Brick Lane to Hyde Park.

My name is Jamal Hassan and I currently work at Camden Community Law Centre. In the 1970s I was involved with community and youth work in the East End from 1972 until 1981. In my opinion, the late 1970s was the turning point for the Bangladeshi community, not only in the East End, but in Britain as a whole.

When I came to this country in 1972, I realised that Asians, Black people and anybody who came from a colonial background were still perceived as subservient to the Whites. It seemed to be generally thought that White people were superior and we were inferior. As a result of that feeling, there was little or no interaction between White people and Asian people.

Not only was racism very apparent, but institutional racism was very deep rooted. Not long before the 1970s, people with foreign names had had to change their names in order to get a job. That sort of racism was felt by Black ethnic minority people and I was told that the first turning point for this community was in 1962, when there was a race riot in Notting Hill Gate. Following the riot, White people started to accept the Black community in this country, before that, it seemed they did not even comprehend the existence of Black people.

Despite this, the Asians, because of their cultural and religious differences and language problems, were badly treated by society. Indians, Bangladeshis and the Pakistanis were all known to and described by many Whites as 'Pakis'. Racists could get away with attacking 'Pakis', who were seen as 'easy targets' because there was no resistance from the Asians when they were attacked. If a White racist slapped an Asian, it was as though they would give another cheek for them to slap again.

This was the attitude maintained by the older generation. The younger generation was not prepared to stand idly by, turning the other cheek. The first incidence of the youth revolting against their elder generation was in 1976 when the Asian youths in Southall, took charge. That was a turning point for Asians in the whole country.

It took over two years for the Asian youths in East London to oppose to the older generation and to resist the racial attacks perpetrated by the White racists. At that time, racist attacks by the National Front (NF) were a daily occurrence in East London. The local National Front members used to be joined by NF members and supporters from Dagenham and other surrounding areas. They had their pitch on the junction of Bethnal Green Road and Brick Lane. This is where every Sunday, they used to sell their literature and perpetuate their propaganda, recruiting new members. Every now and then, they would come out in groups or even alone with the intention of beating up Asian families or Asian individuals or to vandalise Asian shops in Brick lane.

Because we were still subservient and the older generation particularly used to placate the youths, we could not do anything but suffer. The police would hardly take any action or do anything to stop such racial attacks. After the 1976 riot in Southall, the wave came to East

London; slowly and gradually. The youths thought, they could not rely on the older people to defend them, and if they kept on relying on them they would continue to be beaten up by the racists.

1978 was the turning point for the Bangladeshis in East End. The anti-racist movement started to grow stronger and offer worthwhile resistance. In 1978, Brick Lane became the focal point for all anti-racist people all over the country. There were hardly any anti-racist organisations who did not participate in this movement, either by their physical presence and/or through their publicity materials. Very often there would be a demonstration of solidarity in Brick Lane, with different organisations participating with their banners.

The Bangladeshi youths in the East End were highly successful, hosting the centre stage of the anti-racist solidarity movement and containing and directing the movement in a very positive way. Every individual in the community, either individually or collectively, took an active part in combating racist attacks. Activists from outside East London became involved and active in helping the Bangladeshi community stand up and resist the racist attacks. A number of people from outside East London and became involved. Most of them came and went some by just showing their solidarity with us and some with the intention of scoring personal political gain and tried to remain involved in terms of long term commitment.

I have to mention here four people, one local, but not Asian, Terry Fitzpatrick, three from outside, two of them Asians, Farrukh and Mala Dhondy and one Afro Caribbean, Darcus Howe. These four people got involved very successfully with a long term project which, to my mind helped enormously. These popular four started a housing co-op by squatting in a huge Council building, called the 'Pelham Building'. People of all ages regained the spirit of community feeling and became politicised and found it easy to revolt against injustice. Darcus Howe was the editor of 'Race Today' Magazine and was a well known anti-racist activist. These four people helped to politicise a huge number elderly Bangladeshi people by involving them with Housing Co-Op, called 'BHAG' which in Bengali, coincidentally means 'Tiger' The effect was magical!

Although the anti-racist movement was becoming stronger and stronger, we didn't gain the upper hand until the killing of Altab Ali. This incident took place on a local election day, with people around everywhere and yet a young married man with a child was killed in broad daylight by a racist who got away without being caught. After this terrible incident, there was a new sense of urgency in the movement, who became desperate to eradicate racism in East London.

The incidents in the East End became a national concern. Every Sunday we used to have demonstration. It became a ritual that, every Sunday we had to be at the end of Brick Lane, near Bethnal Green. The National Front would be on one side of the road. Shouting and screaming would go on every Sunday at 10am.

Len Murray was the General Secretary of the TUC. In those days TUC's General Secretary was quite a powerful person in the country. One Sunday, Len Murray joined us in the corner of Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road. Mr Murray's participation saw the situation change to some extent.

Everyone, not only the National Front, but also the establishment started to take us seriously. As soon as Altab Ali was killed, we decided to stage a national demonstration.

At that time, I was involved with almost all the Bangladeshi youth and community organisations in East London. I was particularly actively involved with the Bangladesh Welfare Association (BWA). After Altab Ali's death, there was originally going to be three demonstrations- two by the two opposing groups within the BWA and one by a Muslim group.

We had several meetings involving the youths and the elder people at BWA, in the local mosque in Fournier Street and in Toynbee Hall.

The youths played a very effective role in forcing the community to have one big national demonstration instead of three isolated small local demonstrations. I was involved in both the youth groups and the elderly groups and was considered to be impartial and able to relate to all the groups. As a result, I was selected to be the secretary of the coalition organisation to stage the national demonstration. At that time I was a student at Goldsmith College and my tutor gave me 10 days off from attending classes to make this demonstration a success. Because of the generous support from all quarters, it was possible to organise a very successful demonstration from Brick Lane to Hyde Park and ending at Downing Street. Over 7000 different peoples of all ages and organisations from everywhere took part.

After finishing my studies, I joined Tower Hamlets Law Centre as a caseworker. This organisation also played a very effective role in combating racism in East London. The Law Centre dealt with most areas of law, although we did not deal with crime. However, because of the particular situation in East London at that time, an exception was made and we represented the anti-racist people who had been charged with carrying offensive weapons, resisting arrest, causing bodily harm etc. The Law Centre had a 24 hour emergency number to be contacted by the victims of the racist attacks and we used to be at the Magistrates Court almost every day to represent the people arrested by the police in consequence of the trouble at that time.

Following the success of the demonstration, the whole picture in Brick Lane changed. Altab Ali's murder closed the chapter of being attacked and being beaten by racists, with racism in general taking a back-seat. I thought it would be a good idea to celebrate the success of the demonstration in a local park. So, I organised a carnival.

I knew many people in the mainstream political groups. Paul Beasley, who was the Leader of the Council, gave a generous grant for this carnival. I can't remember the amount—I guess it was £600 or £1200. In those days it was a very big amount. It took us 7 to 10 days to organise and it was a huge event, where we renamed the park, 'Altab Ali Park'. All sorts of musical groups came; Asian groups from Southall and a number of White and African and Caribbean bands participated.

We also eventually had Bhangra dance music in the carnival. Bhangra was just coming up and becoming popular at that time. In the preliminary stages of the carnival, I had booked musical groups from every where except Bangladeshi groups from East London. There were popular Bangladeshi cultural groups outside East London. However, I felt that it was important that local Bangladeshi cultural group performed in the carnival and it would have been a shame if we could not have a cultural group from here.

I found out from Jalal that there were no cultural groups from Brick Lane who had the courage to perform in front of a huge crowd in the carnival. I also found out from Jalal that there were two people, Salique and Rana who had a small cultural group. Salique had formed a cultural group called the 'Dishari Shilp Ghosthi'. I went to see him and convinced him that it would be a huge travesty if the local group did not take part in the carnival. Immediately, Salique sent people to call the members of the group and before I could finish my cup of tea, 4-5 young people came to Salique's house where Salique said to them that they had to perform in the carnival. They had to start rehearsing straightaway! I was and still am grateful to Salique for this. His group was cheered by the audience not only because they were local, but because of their stunning performance.

I must mention that there were a number of key people whose contribution to bringing

change in East London was enormous. After all these years, it is not possible to remember all the names, but I will never forget the people without whose support I would not be able to organise the demonstration or the carnival successfully. From the youth groups, Jalal, founder member of BYM (Bangladesh Youth Movement), Shiraj, the founder member of the (Bangladesh) Youth Front and Akik, the founder of the Bangladesh Youth Association. All three played a very important role in the anti-racist movement during the late 1970s in East London. From the older generation, I must mention, Mr Ataur Rahman, the then general secretary of the BWA (Bangladesh Welfare Association), Mr Fakhruddin Ahmed, Mr Junaid Ahmed, Mr Toybur Rahman and Mr Lutfur Rahman Shajahan. I was fortunate enough to have their support all the way.

### **Can you tell us about TOC H?**

Lutfur Rahman Shajahan and Peter East, both of whom have passed away, started this important project based at the Minories, behind Tower Hill underground station. In those days the immigrants could bring their children to the UK without their mothers. It was very common in those days to see Bangladeshi families with young people and without a mother.

There were no provisions for these youths at all. Lutfur Rahman Shajahan and Peter East knew each other from a youth club, called Crypt, near Aldgate. Lutfur Rahman Shahajan was a barrister and also a teacher at the local Myrdle Sreet School and Peter East was the warden of a youth hostel run by the TOC H for White young people Lutfur Rahman discussed with Peter East about a hostel just for the Bangladeshis and the possibility of the TOC.H funding such a project. Peter East thought that it was a good idea and he approached TOC H with the idea of a hostel for the Bangladeshi youths. It was established and became known to everybody in the East End, not as TOC H but as 'No 7'.

No. 7 played a very important role as it allowed the youngsters to take the big step of leaving their parents house in the East End and live an independent life. Most of these youths had educational backgrounds and wanted to study at University. There were 24 to 30 of them, which was quite a lot.

I have to say, looking back, most of these youths were enlightened and they were free and independent and could do whatever they liked. Caroline Adman and John Newbegin two youth workers from 'Avenues Unlimited' joined Peter East and Lutfur Rahman and created a unique project with multi-purposes for the young Bangladeshi youths. It wasn't a place just to stay and sleep at night. Initially young people were not coming forward to leave their parents and to live in a hostel. Lutfur Rahman had insisted that I lived there as a resident which would encourage others to move in. I was the second person to move in. I was a bachelor at the time and was living in Bangladesh Bhaban in Highbury Hill. I agreed to live in the East End, which turned out to be both very exciting and challenging.

We had a huge common room in the hostel with facilities for various games and a TV. We used to go to 4 or 5 camping trips every year. The residents of No7 were slightly better off than others in many ways and they had more confidence in the things we used to do.

I particularly remember one camping trip, somewhere near Lake District. Before our visit, we were told that many of the local people had the impression that Black and Asian people were bad. But our hospitality during the camping trip changed their views about us and the local people fell in love with the youths. Being acquainted with us for a short period the local youths became so friendly with us that when we left they became emotional and everyone was in tears. It was a memorable day for all of us at No 7. The strange thing was that National Front had won a council election seat there. I forget the name of the camping place, it was a racist place, but still we could win the hearts of the local people.

### **What do you think of the Bangladeshi Community now?**

I have to say the Bangladeshi community is improving so much, regardless of some people saying negative things about us. The other day I was watching Channel S (local Bangladeshi channel on Sky); I do not watch that much TV, but the programme was about the achievements of the British Bangladeshi youths. I was really crying after watching that programme because I could see that the achievement of the Bangladeshi community over

the years is amazing, with some outstanding people all over the country. Believe me, we could not dream of it in the 1970s. We were absolutely at the lowest rung of the social ladder in this country. We were nowhere in the society. Our status was almost nothing. At that time the Indians were better off, the Pakistanis were better off. Now after watching this programme on TV, I can see Bangladeshi people doing better in all directions—culturally, economically and educationally. I have to say, it is a marvellous achievement.

### **Can you tell us about the Bangladesh Welfare Association (BWA)?**

It is the first Asian organisation in the whole country set up by our people who came here long time ago, deserted from the ships. It was one of the oldest established community organisations for a minority group. BWA has got a very long history. When I joined BWA it was very ineffective and I had to do all kinds of necessary work for the organisation.

Soon I painfully realised that the lack of unity was pulling our community down. Our energy was wasted and we remained a weak community. There were different factions in the community and it reflected in the running of the Welfare Association. As a result the BWA could not effectively lead the community. Similarly, I remember after very hard work by hundreds of Bangladeshi people we got the 'Kabi Nazrul Centre' which closed down for a long period shortly after it was established. It re-opened and soon after it was closed again. However, the BWA never closed, but there was a time when it was really ineffective.

Until early 1980s, we Bangladeshis never involved ourselves with politics outside our community. The change started by getting involved with local non-Bangladeshi community centres like the Montefiore Community Centre and gradually by becoming members of the mainstream political groups. As a result of our petty politics and lack of unity we do not have a Bangladeshi MP for East London. Tower Hamlets should have had a Bangladeshi MP a long time ago.