

Racism, Self Defence and the Asian Youth Movements

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The need for black people to defend their own communities was a key motivating factor for the establishment of the Asian Youth Movements across Britain in the late 1970s and early 80s. In 1976 Gurdip Singh Chaggar, an 18-year-old school boy was stabbed and fatally wounded outside the Dominion Theatre in Southall. When a passer-by asked the police who it was, he answered 'just an Asian'. Gurdip was not the first South Asian to be murdered on the streets of England, but the impact of his death encouraged a new generation of South Asians to organise in their own defence. The previous generation had established organisations such as the Indian Workers Association, Pakistani Progressive Party, Pakistani Workers Association, Bangladeshi Workers Association, Kashmiri Workers Association and all had protested racist violence and discrimination. But the focus of their attention was on the politics of the subcontinent, rather than the UK. For the young people in the Asian Youth Movements who had grown up in England, the focus of their attention was where they lived, and they felt compelled to fight for their rights both through political protest and direct action. As the Youth of Bradford wrote in 1979:

'We must organise ourselves so that any racist attack can be dealt with effectively. We cannot rely on the police. We must defend ourselves. Black self defence is no offence'. (Singh, *Kala Tara*:3)

While the trigger to the rise of racist violence and 'paki bashing' in the 1970s is often attributed to the inflammatory ideas espoused in Powell's river of blood speech, by 1962 the state itself had created

structures to 'nationalise' racism. The establishment of work permits for commonwealth citizens under the Commonwealth Immigration Law of 1962 meant the migration of non-white labour was controlled, 'not by the market forces of discrimination, but by the regulatory instruments of the state itself' (Sivanandan 1982:12). In playing 'the numbers game', the presence of non-white citizens became framed by the state as the problem. Rather than recognising migrants' contribution to economic growth, as well as the savings that the state made through employing 'ready-made workers' (Sivanandan 1982:103), black people were blamed for economic problems such as housing shortages and presented as a drain on the state purse; in education migrant children were viewed as responsible for keeping educational standards low and were siphoned into remedial classes or bussed out of their areas. And in the month before Chaggar's death the media fuelled the fire with headlines such as 'Asians jump housing queues', 'Scandal of 600 a week immigrants' and 'Asian invasion'. Attacks on Asian rose and NF activity increased. Days later Chaggar was killed.

Chaggar's death was not only the result of the rise of racist and fascist violence in the 1970s but also the result of the police's failure to protect black communities. The dismissive attitude of the police officer who stood with Chaggar was to echo in the minds of young South Asians across the UK who mobilised in the defence of their communities. Some years later the words of that policeman were remembered in a poem called 'Just Another Asian', written by a member of Sheffield Asian Youth Movement:

'...they stabbed him in the face and chest
They stabbed him in the back
Then they kicked him as he lay there
and told him to go back

In the stillness in the moonlight
stands a woman by her gate
Waiting for her husband
but tonight he will be late

The police stand by his body
Nothing much to say
Just another Asian
Has been killed today

(*Kala Mazdoor*, 1983)

The determination to defend their communities from racist aggression and violence was a key motivating factor for the Asian Youth Movements that emerged across the country in the late 1970s. On 23 April 1976, St George's Day, a few weeks before Chaggar was killed, the National Front organised a march and an election meeting at a local school in Manningham, Bradford. For an organisation that advocated the repatriation of migrants, to hold a meeting in the heart of the Asian community was an attack on the community as a whole, and while the Trades Council marched into town to make a symbolic protest against fascism, young South Asians felt compelled to defend their community. It was about 'defending our homes and our community basically, because that was where we lived, I lived on Lumb Lane' (Rashid, in Ramamurthy 2013:24)

While thoughts of the need for their own organisation were brewing in Bradford, the death of Chaggar some weeks later in Southall, propelled the youth of Southall to organise in their own defence. The police did not only appear to dismiss the value of South Asian lives, but responded aggressively by arresting two of the young people who marched on the street to demand answers. This forced a sit-in outside the police station to call for their release. A demand which they won. The next day the Southall Youth Movement was formed. 'Shock waves of that fight back travelled all over the UK and hit us in Bradford' (Ali, *Kala Tara*, 1979:7). A few months later the Indian Progressive Youth Association was established in Bradford, eventually reforming as the Asian Youth Movement a year later. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, movements formed in major cities such as

Manchester, Sheffield, Leicester and Birmingham, as well as in small towns such as Burnley, Blackburn and Luton.

Inspired by the principles of self-help and organised resistance from the Black Power movement, as well as by their own anti-colonial movements and the movement against apartheid in South Africa, young South Asians saw the connections between their own oppression and that of others. It was only ten days after Chaggar's death on 5 June 1976 that they witnessed the massacre of students marching against apartheid in South Africa through their television screens. The struggle against racism was international and they were a part of it.

To express this comradeship and solidarity, they embraced the term black, rejecting labels such as brown or coloured. This identification can be seen in the names of their papers Kala Tara (Black Star); Kala Mazdoor (Black Worker); Kala Shoor (Black Noise), as well as the symbol of the black fist on their badges and literature. Inspired by each other's actions, the Asian Youth of a variety of towns and cities mobilised and organised in support of each other. Although always looking to build solidarities they were not afraid to critically assess the actions of the left:

'The ANL nationally has been the focal point of struggle against racism and fascism. However in September 1978 they had a massive carnival in South London whilst fascists triumphantly marched through the streets of East London. Where were they?' (Singh, *Kala Tara*:3)

On 23rd of April, exactly three years after the attempt by the NF to intimidate the Asian community in Bradford, the NF organised an election meeting at Southall town hall. This time the NF had fielded candidates in nearly 50% of constituencies in the 1979 general elections, it was a strategy that not only led to significant television coverage, but was also a platform through which they could pursue the intimidation of Asian communities through election meetings in the heart of constituencies which they knew they would never win. A few days before the events in Southall members of the Asian Youth Movements from Bradford and Southall brought the delegates of a conference on Asian youth onto the streets of Leicester to defend the city against fascists. On 23 April it was the turn of Southall to be defended.

The severity of the brutality with which the police attacked protestors in Southall was to be felt by youth across the country. The Asian Youth Movement (Bradford) magazine, *Kala Tara*, profiled the events through printing the transcript of 'Southall on Trial' in the first edition of their paper, and organised the circulation of the video platforming Southall Defence Committee. The violence in Southall had not been meted out by fascists but by the police, marking the state as not only unprepared to defend black communities but as actively hostile to them.

The police violence and intimidation of the community of Southall and their supporters can only be described as a military operation with the Special Patrol Group clearing the streets and viciously attacking protestors. As one eye witness recounted 'the police abused us, called us black bastards, black whores, wogs and niggers, their racist abuse was accompanied by racist attacks' (Parita, *Kala Tara*:4). Over a thousand people were injured, 700 arrested and 342 charged with criminal offences. Blair Peach, a school teacher who was an active member of the NUT was killed and Clarence Brown a singer from the band Misty and Roots (a band that was to become a favourite for many members of the youth movements) was left in a coma for 5 months. The youth movements nationally intersected the need to challenge racist violence and police violence with the need to resist the state's own racist immigration policies. They also continued the tradition of challenging racism on the shop floor and the racism of the trade unions and recognised the importance of international solidarity to those suffering the legacy of British imperialism.

While each movement had their strengths and priorities, they often worked together, offering solidarity across towns and cities, a force that culminated in the national mobilisation for the Bradford 12. The Bradford 12 case saw 12 young Asian men from Sikh, Muslim, Hindu and Christian backgrounds charged with conspiracy to cause explosives and endanger lives after making petrol bombs, that they never used, to defend their community against fascists. The failure of the police to protect black communities, along with their inherent racism were key factors in the defence case. The

twelve did not deny making the petrol bombs but they argued that they had made them in self-defence. The national campaign for the twelve involved members of Southall Youth Movement and Southall Rights, as well as religious groups of all denominations; feminist groups; radical bookshops; trade unions; left parties and international solidarity movements. These organisations came together to defend these twelve men because they had been involved over the past five years in defending others. The network of solidarity and organisation that had been established supported the legal team and they were acquitted.

As one AYM song proclaimed:

'We shall fight and win the day
Self defence is the only way!'

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Image Credit: Cover of Kala Tara, the journal of the AYM (Bradford), 1979