

East End Bengalis and the Labour Party – the end of a long relationship?

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The London Borough of Tower Hamlets is a favourite site for research on ethnic minorities because, in its Bengali Muslim population, it is home to an exceptionally concentrated ethnic minority group. It is also an area with a long history of immigration and poverty, in the immediate shadow of the wealth of the City. Post-war immigrants from what was then East Pakistan followed a migration chain pioneered by earlier Bengali seamen, and Bengalis now make up over a third of the borough's population and over half in Spitalfields and Whitechapel. This geographical concentration allows us to examine the interacting forces generated through ethnicity, religion, community, place, idealism and self-interest that together impact on electoral politics in a multicultural society. Inevitably such an examination centres on the Labour Party.

The story of the East End Bengalis and the Labour Party is one of a liaison that has turned sour. And like in many more personal relationships, the forces that finally drove the parties apart are the same that first brought them together. Now, as in the past, the main force behind East End Bengali politics is a community-based pragmatism, and the emergence and subsequent evolution of this can be understood by looking at it in the context of wider developments in progressive politics.

The affiliation of ethnic minorities with the Labour Party was once a truth universally acknowledged,¹ and reinforced by the overt racism of the Conservative opposition. In Tower Hamlets, this affiliation was also the best way to achieve real power within the political establishment, as (apart from a two term Liberal hiatus) the Party dominated local politics from the 1920s to the Iraq war. The Labour Party was the natural recipient of most Bengali votes and the natural forum for most mainstream Bengali political activity.²

Beginnings: Looking Back to East Bengal

For the earliest immigrants, however, the focus of political activity, as of their lives more generally, was their East Bengali homeland, compounded in the period following the Second World War with immediate concerns over immigration. Many of these immigrants had little education, and a prominent role was played by a small intellectual elite of students and young professionals who had learnt their politics in the persecuted left and nationalist movements of their homeland. It might have been expected that this would have encouraged the spread of socialist ideas in the immigrant community more generally, but the political approach taken was in line with the popular front politics propagated by the Communist Party, which specified that political ideology be kept in the background.

¹ Saggat 1998, 6

² This picture of automatic support was made clear in interviews.

Popular front principles were applied whether doing grass-roots community work or campaigning on major issues such as Bangladeshi independence. Tasadduk Ahmed, who played a pivotal role in British Bengali politics and put the Pakistani Welfare Association onto a firm footing, explained:

My main experience in the UK has been the experience of how to manage or organize united front activities, keeping my own belief to myself and to my close associates.³

Left involvement in community work is meant to bring more than immediate benefits; it is conceived as a way of raising the political consciousness of the people who become involved. However, it is very easy for immediate demands to exclude all other considerations, and for political ideas to get little exposure.

A similar approach was taken (by Tasadduk and others) in supporting the independence struggle in 1971. Despite the prominence of far left thinking among the political leaders, popular front politics ensured that it was not Marxist ideas and organizations that gained adherents from the political mobilization.⁴

In fact 1971 provided an important foundation for the Bengali community's close relationship with Labour. This rested both on the involvement of Labour MPs, who kept up pressure on the Conservative government to support Bangladesh,⁵ and on the Party's perceived ideological link with the Awami League, who dominated the new Bangladeshi Government. Peter Shore, then Labour MP for Stepney, found his own involvement 'led to an ongoing and very close relationship with the community, and indeed with their leaders'.⁶

Developing links with the Labour Party were cemented by the post-war immigration, when future hopes were focused increasingly on a settled life in Britain, and the Bengalis found they could turn to their MP with immigration and other problems. A few British Bengalis returned to take up positions in the newly independent Bangladesh, but generally the pulls were all in the other direction, and many Bengali men who were already working here began to bring over their wives and families. The early 70s was a period of settlement and consolidation in the Bengali East End, a prelude to the mushrooming of locally based political activism at the end of the decade.

Fighting for the Bengali Community in London

In the late 70s and early 80s East End Bengalis became caught up in two major battles – against an aggressive racism being promulgated by the National Front, and for decent and safe housing. The housing crisis was exacerbated by the arrival of the families, and the new young generation played a major role in the campaigns. Many of them had witnessed radical political action first hand during the war, and unlike the older generation they saw themselves as permanent immigrants. They were ready to

³ Caroline Adams's interview with Abdul Mannan and Tasadduk Ahmed 1980s

⁴ For a fuller discussion see Glynn 2006

⁵ See Peter Shore in the *Silver Jubilee Commemorative Volume of Bangladesh Independence 1997*, 37 One of those most involved was John Stonehouse. Despite his later notoriety and conviction for fraud, the Bengali consensus is that his role in 1971 was genuinely disinterested and honest.

⁶ Shore, interviewed 15 February 2001

fight for their rights, and it was these battles that mobilized the generation that now makes up the greatest part of the Bengali political establishment.⁷

At the centre of the fight were organizations set up by New Left activists from the Race Today Collective with the ultimate aim of creating a movement for radical black self-organization.⁸ They were by no means the only organizations working in the East End, but through their hard-fought grass-roots campaigns they were able to involve more people and generate more radical forms of protest. Helal Abbas, who was secretary of their Bengali Housing Action Group in his teens, and was later to become leader of the borough council, dates his awareness of the possibilities of political action from his involvement in the housing struggles,⁹ and many others, even if they were not themselves involved with these organizations, felt their influence in the campaigns of the late 70s.

In the event, for most of those taking part there was generally little time given to ideological discussion; but separatist organization itself discouraged the making of links with wider working-class issues, and encouraged a scepticism towards what *Race Today* called the ‘white left’ – as well as facilitating greater ethnic concentration within certain wards. Despite the radical rhetoric, black organization nowhere really challenged the British establishment – only attempted to take its fair place within it.¹⁰

A Community within Mainstream Politics

For most of those involved, community-based activism merged easily into community-based pragmatism. Bengalis were suffering through racism and often appalling living conditions and they felt the need to help their fellow immigrants the most efficient way possible. For many this meant joining the Labour Party; and, despite their move to mainstream politics, they generally continued to see themselves as representatives of the Bengali community.

The overriding reason given by my interviewees for joining the party was to continue campaigning for better and fairer treatment of the Bengali community (though of course there were always also those who thought they could achieve this better outside organized politics). Self-organization, along ‘ethnic’ lines, had mobilized a new layer of activists, but now they wanted access to the mechanisms of power. As Abbas put it, ‘you can only change so much from outside’.¹¹

In general, Bengali Labour politics can be described as pragmatic, even when it is dressed in socialist rhetoric. However, the object of that pragmatism varies from the ‘community’ to the individual – perhaps portrayed as the true representative of the community. Sunahwar Ali described his own matter-of-fact approach:

⁷ For an account of their campaigns see Glynn 2005

⁸ Through their activism and journal the Race Today Collective was at the forefront of Black Radicalism in Britain. Black Radicalism emerged out of the interaction between Communist popular frontism and anti-colonial and black rights movements. It was a formative strand of the New Left that developed from criticism of excessive structuralism *within* Marxism, to criticism of Marxism itself. (Glynn 2005)

⁹ Interviewed 10 October 2001

¹⁰ Shukra 1998. There had also been attempts at black organization among the Bengalis at the time of the racist murder of Tosir Ali in 1970.

¹¹ Interviewed 10 October 2001. A similar point was made in interviews with Jalal 16 August 2000, Shukur 12 September 2000 and Sunahwar 23 January 2001

I'd rather work with people who can deliver thing[s] for the community ... because sometime[s] ideology doesn't work.¹²

When I asked one prominent Labour councillor to explain his choice of party he told me:

...we thought, OK, the fastest way to get in, in this area, will be through the Labour Party because that's the party in control of the local mechanisms at the time ... it wasn't for any political ideals ... because all of them were just as bad ... the Labour Party had brought some of the worst immigration policies and procedures of that period ... The Tories were far too Right for us to even consider ... and to get the voters to vote for it in an area like this; and the Liberals we thought would never get into power ...¹³

A Revolution in the Labour Party

At first, though, many of this newly politicised generation found the Labour Party far from welcoming. Some early Bengali immigrants appear to have had no problems in joining their ward parties,¹⁴ but many Bengalis were faced with a blank refusal. When Sunahwar Ali and two or three others applied to join the party in Spitalfields, at the heart of Bengali settlement, they were told, ‘ “Sorry, we don't have vacancy, we've got too many member, we cannot allow.”’¹⁵ The situation was changed by the intervention of Labour left-wingers, but Sunahwar's explanation exhibits the prevailing distrust of their motives:

a group of certain people... those who believe in left policies on the Labour Party side, they thought, “This is the time we can utilise them.” They came and said, “Why don't you become a member we'll help you?”¹⁶

The inclusion of people from all 'ethnic' backgrounds can also be seen as flowing directly from socialist ideology, and the view of these events from the left is a little different from many Bengali perceptions. At that time, Labour ruled over Tower Hamlets almost unopposed, and it's entrenched, relatively right-wing leadership clung fiercely to power. Jill Cove, one of a small group of Labour left-wingers, explains that it was not only Bengalis who had difficulties breaking into the Party fortress. She applied to join Spitalfields Ward Labour Party, together with her partner George, in the late 70s; and they were also told there was a waiting list and were given no further information. In 1979, after more than a year, they got hold of application forms and marched into the ward meeting demanding membership. But there were many others in a similar position, and every month the meetings were lobbied by a crowd of would-be members. On one occasion, when there were some twenty people outside, Jill and George found there were only three other members present, and they proposed

¹² Interviewed 23 January 2001

¹³ Interviewed September 2000

¹⁴ Sheikh Mannan (interviewed 30 March 2002) joined on his arrival in England in the mid 60s, though that was not in Tower Hamlets; Abdul Malik joined in 1968 and was active on his EC (Adams 1994, 125); and Ashik Ali was welcomed into St Katherine's Ward in 1976 (interview with Ashik Ali, then the only Bengali Labour councillor, in *Labour Herald* 26 November 1982)

¹⁵ Interviewed 23 January 2001. Abdus Shukur (interviewed 12 September 2000) recalls a similar reaction.

¹⁶ Interviewed 23 January 2001

opening up the party. The new members admitted that day – who could be described as belonging to various ‘ethnicities’ and social backgrounds – included Abbas and three other future Bengali councillors.¹⁷

The 1982 council elections added a new dimension to the sense of Bengali exclusion, and this was met by radical action. The Labour Party had chosen to stand one Bengali candidate in St Katherine’s ward,¹⁸ but they had nominated no Bengalis in Spitalfields. John Eade has recorded in detail how, in protest, four Bengalis (two of whom ‘claimed to have been members of the Labour party’¹⁹) put themselves up for election as independents, and a fifth stood for the newly formed SDP. Two of the independents were chosen and supported by the People’s Democratic Alliance (PDA), which was created for the purpose of the election by delegates from different Bengali community groups. The four independents were of varied ages and experience, but their action was a natural outcome of the politics of self-organization that had been promoted in the 70s. Spitalfields elects three councillors. When the results were announced, Nurul Huque of the PDA topped the poll, while the other PDA candidate missed third place by 26 votes.

Abbas had accepted his party’s decisions and campaigned for Labour, but he confirms that the election had the desired impact:

I think from that [the] party took the message clearly at the following elections: we saw Bangladeshi candidates - people who were capable and able to represent the local community - were given opportunities to stand as Labour Party candidate[s].²⁰

This was also the year after the 1981 Brixton riot, when the neglect of their black constituents had been brought abruptly to the notice of politicians of all kinds.²¹

In fact, Abbas himself was soon to be selected by the Labour Party to stand in the 1985 Spitalfields by-election. Somewhat perversely, the PDA could not resist putting up their own candidate, who squeezed the Labour majority down to just nine votes. The PDA candidate was able to make use of strong Bangladeshi village networks to mobilize his voters.²² This kind of clan politics is often explained as an Asian import, but it is probably more accurate to say that a close community with strong patriarchal structures allows for the most efficient use of those non-party ties and networks that are exploited by politicians of all backgrounds. The importance of patronage relations was strengthened by communication difficulties that left those who could translate English and Bengali (and understood political procedure) in a powerful position. Existing patterns of patronage that are found in many ethnic minority communities will inevitably be exploited in politics, and possibly reinforced. In ward meetings leading Bengali members would refer to others as ‘my members’; and when Labour canvassers went round Spitalfields they did not bother to knock on

¹⁷ Jill Cove, interviewed 16 October 2001

¹⁸ Ashik Ali, who described himself as hard-working and on the left (*Labour Herald* 26 November 1982), topped the poll for the ward.

¹⁹ Eade 1989, 46

²⁰ Interviewed 10 October 2001

²¹ Shukra 1994, 54-5

²² See comment by Robbie McDuff in Eade 1989, 76 – 7, and *New Life* 26 July 1985

every door - Bengali party members knew where to find the community leaders who would be able to deliver perhaps twenty votes.²³

The first Bengali Labour Party members were quick to recruit more. Rajonuddin Jalal, who became a prominent councillor, recalls:

...by the mid 80s, I think, we realised that there is a need to capture political power if you're going to change policies in the town hall. And that's what we did. We started recruiting Bengalis actively, and there was a time when the Labour Party got fed up, they did not want any more Bengalis.²⁴

Jill Cove comments that it was 'like opening the flood gates'. She recalls that it was nothing to get a hundred and fifty membership applications at a ward meeting, often with the forms filled up in the same handwriting. At AGMs it was possible to sign up at the door, and Bengali members would be outside ready to pay for others to join. Mass memberships were accepted in principle, but subjected to random checks that exposed many names that were invalid – people who had not been aware of what was happening or were away in Bangladesh or even no longer alive. This did not exempt Cove from having to refute accusations of racism for questioning these lists.²⁵ There were also accusations that ward parties were being packed by supporters to secure election of certain Bengalis to party positions or their nomination for council elections, and one of my (Bengali) interviewees described how this worked:

[A] few people, they got some money together and asked all the village people, all the people that they know, to become Labour Party member of... a particular [ward]. And so if you got fifty or two hundred members and if you can pay two hundred times £5 per year [membership] for couple of years, then you can be chosen for whatever you want to be in that particular party.²⁶

Such political tactics are not actually illegal (providing the paper members do exist and are willing participants). Nor, though South-Asian kinship links can be used to make them spectacularly successful, are they confined to ethnic minority communities. At the same time, white politicians are not above making use of Asian patronage systems when they work to their own advantage.²⁷ Eade notes that the local Labour leader liked to 'work through informal links with local activists', 'largely on a personal basis',²⁸ and politicians today all seek out ethnic minority 'community leaders'.

²³ Jill Cove, interviewed 16 October 2001. 1982 was the first time it was necessary to canvas, and Whites and Bengalis canvassed together. For the white members this removed language problems, and it also dispelled the natural fears encountered by immigrants who opened their door to find a stranger with a clipboard.

²⁴ Interviewed 16 August 2000. Jalal no longer lives in the East End and defected to the Liberal Democrats in 2007

²⁵ Cove also rejects Eade's suggestion that the left used membership disputes to delay entry of Bengalis not sympathetic to their views, claiming that this would anyway have required a greater knowledge of Bengali community politics than they possessed. For her, it was a question not of whether people were left or right, but whether they actually existed.

²⁶ Interviewed April 2001. He decided to do community work outside the political arena.

²⁷ Kalbir Shukra in Saggat 1998, 128 – 9; Solomos and Back 1995, 72 – 4, 80, 99, 103-4 and 106-7

²⁸ Eade 1989, 41. Paul Beasley led the Majority Group in Tower Hamlets Labour Party from the early 70s until 1984

Eade's 1989 study provides the main published account of the Bengalis' early relationship with the Labour Party. It is concerned with the mechanisms of local politics and their interaction with community groups and networks, and the picture he paints is complex, and at times Machiavellian. His account is not set against an analysis of political practice more generally, and so risks being hijacked by those who present a 'racialised political discourse' in which it is predominantly black, and especially South Asian, politics that is associated with corruption.²⁹

White politicians are also objects of racialized discourse: notably in 'the perception that the left have used black representation in order to fulfil their own objectives'.³⁰ This discourse – demonstrated by the comments above on getting party membership – was common to many of my interviewees. It was encouraged by the separatist ideology of black organization, and a generally pragmatic (as distinct from idealistic) political understanding.³¹ When such discourses operate, every action can be ascribed an underlying racist or supremacist motive, whether or not it actually exists, with the risk both of obscuring actual racism and of perpetuating a division into 'them and us'.

Bengali Representation

Despite these feelings, and the legacy of black separatism, the national debate on Labour Party Black Sections does not seem to have played a very significant part in Tower Hamlets.³² An Ethnic Minorities Group was formed in 1986 to push for more ethnic minority councillors,³³ but the Bengali activists were already operating as an ethnic lobby and did not feel a strong need for a broader 'black' organizational structure.

The selection of a Labour parliamentary candidate to replace Peter Shore on his retirement in 1997 generated inevitable expectations that there would be a Bengali MP. Competition was bitter,³⁴ and it has been suggested that the unseemly struggle and the lack of Bengali unity were instrumental in preventing a Bengali from being chosen. However, the selection was also seen by many as an example of party racism, and the anger and frustration over Labour's 'failure' to put forward a Bengali candidate was reflected in the 1997 election results. Oona King was safely elected for Labour, but the Conservative's Kabir Chowdhury bucked the trend to celebrate a six per cent swing in his favour.³⁵ A Bengali MP would be seen as a symbol of community achievement, and the lack of this type of ethnic representation is commonly interpreted as a denial of democratic rights.

²⁹ This term is used and explored by Solomos and Back 1995, 95 - 113

³⁰ Solomos and Back 1995, 157. Although they do not actually use the term this way round, this perception, whether or not it has some basis in fact, can be described as a racialised discourse too.

³¹ Eade's reference to 'the tenuous nature of the alliance between white radicals within the Labour party and Bangladeshi activists' (Eade 1989, 168) suggests that he has also taken on this discourse, as the term 'alliance' implies something more deliberate than a coalescence of interests.

³² Peter Shore, interviewed 15 February 2001; Helal Abbas, interviewed 10 October 2001

³³ *Hackney Gazette* 21 March 1986; Eade 1989, 78 – 9. The group was co-ordinated by Jalal

³⁴ Jalal, one of the main contenders, was suspended from the party after being accused of sending a fax to the press indicting the local Labour group leader with racism, forged to make it look as though it came from his rival Pola Uddin. He denied the charge. (*Evening Standard* 20 February 1995; *East London Advertiser* 23 February 1995 and 2 March 1995; *Independent* 27 May 1995)

³⁵ <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/election97/constituencies/47.htm>>

As councillors, Bengalis have generally regarded themselves as fighting for the betterment of their community, as raising the community profile, and as role models.³⁶ However, councillors will also emphasise that they are there to represent all their constituents. Catherine Neveu, who researched Bengali electoral representation in 1989, commented on the contradictory attitudes (from Bengalis and others) that both 'expect Bangladeshi councillors to be representatives of the Bangladeshi population and ... accuse them of acting so'.³⁷ Abbas, as first Bengali leader of the council, attempted to satisfy both views:

By having a Bengali leader now on the council, I think we are sending very clear messages about equality ... but also able to demonstrate that as a Bengali leader you can represent not only the Bangladeshi community ...³⁸

This problem is as old as ethnic minorities in politics.³⁹

Most Bengali councillors voted with left party members on measures aimed at lessening deprivation, in which, to quote Abbas, the Bengalis and the left shared a 'natural common agenda',⁴⁰ but there was no especial affinity with left issues more generally. Thus, there was a lot of Bengali support for the fight against the Poll Tax, which impacted heavily on the poor and especially on overcrowded households with several adult members, but no particular Bengali consensus on campaigning for the miners. Within the general give and take of political bargaining, Bengali party members could act as a group quite independently of more orthodox left/right divisions, leading to strange changing alliances.⁴¹ Links to different Bengali political parties also play a crucial part in individual political careers and add another layer of bonds and influences.

Other Political Platforms

While there will always be accusations of ethnic voting to ensure Bengali councillors and of white voters not voting for Bengalis, the real electoral battles have been between the politics of the different parties, and the real fight for Bengali representation has been *within* the parties. At a local level that has long been won. The 1997 general election saw Bengalis standing across the political spectrum from the Referendum Party to Socialist Labour, and Bengalis currently occupy a disproportionate 31 out of 51 council seats.⁴²

Before the eruption of Respect (which will be discussed later), those who had had enough of Labour could choose between the Conservatives, who until recently had not had a single councillor elected, and the Liberals, who came to power locally for eight years from 1986, after a vote-splitting breakaway by the former Labour

³⁶ The first points were spelt out clearly by Shukur, interviewed 12 September 2000. The importance of role models is confirmed by a Bengali careers advisor (interviewed April 2001), who told me that the young people he discusses with do not want to do jobs that they have not heard of other Bengalis doing.

³⁷ Neveu 1989, 10

³⁸ Interviewed 10 October 2001

³⁹ See Dadabhai Naoroji's speech when he was prospective parliamentary candidate for the Liberals in Holborn in 1886, quoted in Visram 1986, 248 note 45

⁴⁰ Interviewed 10 October 2001

⁴¹ Compare, for example, *East London Advertiser* 27 April 1995 and 2 May 1996

⁴² 17 out of 27 Labour councillors, 3 out of 6 LibDem and all 11 Respect (Autumn 2007).

leadership. The racism of Tower Hamlets's Liberal administration became national news on more than one occasion,⁴³ but this did not prevent some Bengalis choosing to pursue their political path through the Liberal Party. As one of those who became a councillor made clear to me, this was quite consistent with a pragmatic and community-centred approach focussed on taking part in mainstream decision making; and as the Labour Party was already crowded with Bengalis he found less competition for positions of influence.⁴⁴

The Conservative Party has been less effective as a route to local power, but does attempt to appeal to conservative Muslim family values.⁴⁵ However, changes in socio-economic circumstances have been reflected in an increase in Conservative support, as occurred with the Jews in previous generations.

The Image becomes Tarnished

A generation on, as the young Bengali activists of the late 70s and 80s settled in to become the new political establishment, many Bengali councillors were being criticised in much the same way as they themselves used to criticise the older council regime and their more cautious seniors in the Bangladesh Welfare Association. One young Bengali woman described them to me as a powerful network of middle-aged Bengali men whose petty politics disgusted many of her generation.⁴⁶ And local councillors (like national Bangladeshi politicians) had become figures of fun for the politics class at Tower Hamlets College, where some students argued that they were only interested in a good name and staying in power.⁴⁷ For older Bengalis, or recent immigrants, who may have little English, Bengali councillors still provide a vital link to local power structures, but for many others, the presence of Bengalis on the council has made no difference, and some expressly told me they would choose to see a white councillor if they had a problem.⁴⁸ As Abbas points out, distrust of politicians is a general phenomenon,⁴⁹ but when, in 2005, a young Bengali Labour councillor was caught sequestering regeneration money from a youth group,⁵⁰ the case was perceived as a symptom of a wider malaise.

Diversity through Gender

Although the British-born generation are getting more actively involved, there have been relatively few Bengali women in politics. A combination of language problems, fear of racial attack, and a 'modesty' inspired and sometimes enforced by both religion and tradition, still prevents many women from merely going out of their homes; and even when they are backed by a supportive family, women with political ambitions may have problems. When I began interviewing in 2000, the one female Bengali councillor was a young barrister. She told me that although she received tremendous cross-cultural support for her political activities, there were always those

⁴³ Glynn 2006b. Most Bengalis were guaranteed to vote Labour, so appealing to white xenophobia made electoral sense. The Liberals had a large Bengali membership on paper, but much of this was in thrall to the personal ambitions of their community leader. (Sabine Drewes 1994)

⁴⁴ Interviewed January 2001

⁴⁵ Shahagir Faruk, Conservative parliamentary candidate in 2001 and 2005, described himself as born Conservative with conservative family values (interviewed 1 August 2001).

⁴⁶ Interviewed October 2000

⁴⁷ Separate interviews with two students, July 2000

⁴⁸ This view was put by three separate interviewees.

⁴⁹ Interviewed 10 October 2001

⁵⁰ *East London Advertiser* 4 March 2005 and 15 March 2006, bbc.co.uk 3 April and 31 July 2006

Bengalis, especially men, who disapproved of such behaviour in a young unmarried Bengali woman; and they were not above trying to sabotage her chances. On the morning of her first selection meeting an anonymous letter went out accusing her of having had a white boyfriend at law school: an (unfounded) charge that was enough to damage her reputation with the older generation and temporarily prevent her selection.⁵¹

For Pola Uddin, the main barrier appears to have been the assumption by institutions, starting with her grammar school, that Asian women have no ambitions beyond raising a family. Her political career, which has taken her to the House of Lords as a New Labour Peer, provides a striking example of the interaction of community based pragmatism with the wider political climate. She lived through the Bangladesh war as a child and told me ‘I don’t understand any Bengalis ... in my generation who wouldn’t be interested in politics.’ When she saw the restrictions on what women and Bengalis could do in Britain, joining a movement ‘was just as natural as drinking water or breathing air’, and later Jill Cove pushed her into joining the Labour Party. As an outspoken and thick-skinned Bengali woman, in a political environment obsessed with identity and with demonstrating diversity, she found herself much in demand:

... it was nice to have a [woman] who could stand up in a meeting and say exactly what someone else wanted to say and they couldn’t; so ... I was often being pushed to represent something. And that was a very useful tool in the Labour Party in the early years, and ... within the community sector.⁵²

While political women provide important role models to Bengali girls, it would be naïve to think that their involvement is either symptom or cause of more fundamental political change. Pola Uddin herself fitted comfortably into the market-based pragmatic politics of pre-9/11 Blairism; and the superficially radical choice, in 2007, of a young inexperienced Bengali woman as Labour candidate for the next parliamentary election is seen as a strategic victory for the established Labour leadership.⁵³

The Era of New Labour

The participation of Bengalis – men and women – was welcomed by Labour as evidence of the party’s anti-racist credentials, but multiculturalism can also be used to give a progressive veneer to an administration that has abandoned class-based policies. In addition, the prioritising of cultural identity cuts across class divisions, making this a useful tool for those wanting to turn their back on old labour values.

Centralising New Labour now controls council policy; and new partnership forms of local governance are allowing old forms of representative democracy to be bypassed through the direct involvement of un-elected interest groups. Interest group politics – developed in numerous regeneration schemes, and now impacting mainstream services – encourages the further development of ethnic or religious-based organization, with different groups pitted against each other in a divisive competition for limited resources. Both Conservative and Labour governments

⁵¹ Jusna Begum, interviewed 19 September 2000

⁵² Pola Uddin, interviewed 17 January 2005

⁵³ East London Advertiser 9 May 2007

actively promoted the Muslim Council of Britain as representatives of British Muslims,⁵⁴ and the East London Mosque is used as a channel for the provision of local services.⁵⁵

The Political Lure of Islam, and a New Popular Front

By the turn of the millennium, the only radical force for political change was coming from the Islamists⁵⁶. Islamist groups, especially those centred on the East London Mosque, were moving into the vacuum created by the decline of the left, using a combination of ideological argument and grass-roots organization to present themselves as an active alternative to the alienation of neoliberal capitalism. When, in the aftermath of 9/11, more Bengalis, like Muslims everywhere, began to rediscover their religious identity, they found a thriving network of religious organizations already in place.

British Muslims were encouraged to express their opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq under the banner of the Muslim Association of Britain.⁵⁷ The MAB played a distinct role in the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) dominated Stop the War Coalition, which was set up to co-ordinate anti-war protest. In January 2004 this anti-war coalition was formally inaugurated into a new political organization under the banner of Respect, with ex-Labour MP George Galloway as its most prominent leading figure. From the beginning, MAB support was conditional – they supported individual election candidates according to their assessment of Muslim interests, regardless of party – and they made no compromises in their philosophy,⁵⁸ but even this circumscribed MAB involvement in the Respect project soon petered out. Respect, however, continued to be regarded as ‘the party for Muslims’, and they were welcomed by a leadership increasingly branded as opportunist.⁵⁹ Unlike the Islamists, the SWP and its allies were all too ready to compromise. ‘Because we’re a coalition’, George Galloway explained, ‘we don’t bind a Muslim candidate... to the explicitly socialist parts of our programme.’⁶⁰ The prospect of, even limited, electoral success soon attracted a similar layer of community activists and small businessmen as once saw the Labour Party as the route to community (or personal) uplift. Abjol Miah, leader of the Respect councillors, told me

... if Labour didn't take us to a war, then, I think, my point of view could have been a bit different. I still have friends in the Labour Party, and they argue that you can bring change from within the party.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Hansard 19 July 2007 Column 169WH. The government is now trying to promote an alternative organisation.

⁵⁵ The mosque works with the health authorities, job centre and local schools.

⁵⁶ Glynn 2002

⁵⁷ Although the MAB had relatively little presence on the ground, their involvement with the anti-war movement at organisational level made it easy for Muslims to protest against the war as Muslims.

⁵⁸ The MAB was happy to work alongside secular socialists because they saw Islam as in the ascendant and regarded socialism as no threat - interview with Azzam Tamimi, MAB official spokesperson, 17 January 2005

⁵⁹ This phrase was used on Respect's 2004 European election leaflets distributed outside the East London Mosque. Some of the harshest criticisms have come from the left in the *Weekly Worker*.

⁶⁰ Interview with *Pink News* 21 February 2006

⁶¹ Interviewed 25 July 2007

And one of the new Bengali Labour councillors commented that he and his Respect colleagues were largely aiming for the same thing.⁶² Traditional community networks have been activated to campaign for the new organisation, and there have even been mass-membership applications,⁶³ and defections to and from Labour.⁶⁴

Respect's first electoral success was in the council by-election caused by the corruption scandal. This was followed by the well-documented victory of George Galloway over the pro-war Oona King to become MP for Bethnal Green and Bow in the 2005 general election. This was a sensational battle, but the key issue was always acknowledged to be the Iraq War, which Galloway did not hesitate to describe as a war against Muslims.⁶⁵ With an electorate that, according to Respect estimates, was 55% Bengali, both main contenders attempted to appeal to Bengali voters through their Muslim identity,⁶⁶ and Galloway even claimed that voting for him to oust Oona King gave the best chance of a Bengali MP next time around.

The Bengali focus of the new politics was confirmed in the 2006 council elections. While Respect councillors follow a more Old Labour – and more popular – agenda in areas such as housing, and do pick up anti-New Labour votes, a large part of the electorate did not seem to recognise the new party as representing more than a community-based interest group. The Respect councillors elected were all Bengali and there was a strong correlation between the percentage of votes cast for Respect in each ward, and the percentage of Bengalis.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, a wounded Labour Party limps on, struggling, as elsewhere, to reconcile social democracy and neoliberalism, but also attempting to salvage its credentials as a Bengali and Muslim friendly party, and the natural place for those who want to get something done.

Old Traditions Adapting in New Political Climates

The SWP and Galloway have tried to portray Respect as part of the great East End socialist tradition – and left wing organizations have frequently attempted to generate among the Bengalis an echo of the pre-war left movements in which Jewish immigrants played a key part – but class-based politics have never really taken root in the Bengali East End. Even in the early years of the immigration, when most of the political leadership professed allegiance to various Marxist groups, there was no developed sense of class-consciousness. Many, such as Tasadduk, were themselves in business; popular-front politics incorporated restaurant and workshop owners into

⁶² Conversation at Muslim Community Fair, 28 July 2007

⁶³ *Weekly Worker* 6 July 2006; SWP Appeal to Respect Members 24th October 2007
<http://www.swp.org.uk/respect_appeal.php>

⁶⁴ Long-serving Labour councillor, Ghulam Mortuza defected to Respect in June 2005 and back to Labour that November; Respect councillor Waiseul Islam defected to Labour in May 2007, days before former Labour councillor Kumar Murshid (who had just been cleared of corruption charges) defected to Respect; and in July 2007 Shamim Chowdhury resigned, criticising his Respect party and causing a by-election.

⁶⁵ He told the TELCO hustings on 20 April 2005 'If you make war against Muslims abroad, you are going to end up making war against Muslims at home.'

⁶⁶ Glynn 2006b

⁶⁷ R squared = 63% and P<0.001 – ie 63% of the variation is explained by the percentage of Bengalis.

left-led agitations; and leftist memories of that time can slip into using the term ‘working class’ to include small businessmen.⁶⁸ Trade unionism was never a priority.

The great majority of first generation Bengali immigrants were proletarianised in Britain, but most still held plots of land back in Sylhet, where status is endangered by working on land belonging to a different lineage,⁶⁹ and they did not easily identify themselves as workers. Over the years, money sent back to Sylhet has been built up into sometimes substantial landholdings and other investments, so that families living poor working-class lives in London, may now also be significant property owners.⁷⁰ For a Bengali to call someone working-class is a big insult,⁷¹ and though the term is used by those who wish to imply some sort of link to wider socialist traditions, this is more as a form of rhetoric than to suggest actual class identification. Non-Bengali leftists who tried to identify the Bengalis as part of a wider working class were often regarded with suspicion and accused of hijacking Bengali issues to pursue their own agenda.⁷²

Patriarchal links have always played an important role in Tower Hamlets politics – even transmogrifying into very personal support for Peter Shore when he faced a reselection battle in the mid eighties.⁷³ One leading Labour figure told me, ‘I always ask my people to vote for the Labour Party’, and another explained, ‘I create councillor, I don’t want to be a councillor.’⁷⁴ Non-Bengalis have also not been afraid to make use of these links when it suited them – such as in getting a vote out. The activism of the late 70s and early 80s did allow a new generation to come through, but today’s partnership politics, with its emphasis on ‘community leaders’, encourages the strengthening of all kinds of informal network.

Bengali involvement in British politics developed in parallel with the growth of identity politics and the waning of the politics of class, and those who became politically active in Britain were not expected to weaken older community ties. Instead, the very real challenges of establishing an immigrant community in one of the most deprived areas of London were met through pragmatic community-based organization. This continues to be the basis of British Bengali politics today – even if the community is often referred to as Muslim rather than Bengali, and the chosen vehicle may be Respect rather than the Labour Party. Within its own terms, this strategy may be said to have largely succeeded, in that Bengalis have taken their place at all levels of Tower Hamlets society and Bengali children top the borough’s school league tables; but this is still an area of multiple deprivation. Unemployment among the Bengalis stood at 24% at the time of the 2001 census,⁷⁵ and large portions of the

⁶⁸ E.g. by Syed Abdul Majid Qureshi, interviewed by Caroline Adams in the 1980s

⁶⁹ Gardner 1995, 139

⁷⁰ Gardner 1995

⁷¹ Sunahwar Ali, interviewed 23 January 2001

⁷² Interviews with Anamul Hoque 14 September 2000, Ansar Ahmed Ullah 14 November 2000 and Sunahwar Ali 23 January 2001

⁷³ As Shore put it, ‘There was no question of the Bengali[s] as a group, as it were, being turned against myself or in favour of anyone else.’ (Interviewed 15 February 2001) There was also a Bengali candidate, but Jill Cove was seen as the main rival contender.

⁷⁴ Interviewed 31 January and 7 February 2001

⁷⁵ Tower Hamlets Council *Employment and Income bulletin* v 5.2, section 3.1(iii). Although the figure for white unemployment is only 7%, this will be affected by the large increase in (predominantly white) middle-class residents.

white working class are facing persistent social exclusion. Increasing competition for resources, brought on by the crisis of the welfare state, new immigration from Eastern Europe, and new pressures on the area's resources from middle-class gentrifiers is increasing tensions between ethnic groups.⁷⁶ Fears of growing xenophobia, and especially Islamophobia, are boosting community-based politics, but what is needed instead is a politics that can cut across community divisions and attack structural inequalities.

With grateful thanks to all my interviewees

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⁷⁶ Dench et al 2006; Glynn 2006b

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