

Secular Identities and the Asian Youth Movements

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‘At the time there was no conflict between my religious identity and my affiliation with the term black. I believed that everybody’s religion was personal, but Islam has been demonised after the Rushdie Affair. I lost a lot of friends around that time, because there was no middle ground left. If you criticised Rushdie you were just seen as being against free speech. We couldn’t put our finger on it then, but now we can see it was in the interests of imperialism.’

Matloob Hussain, former member of AYM, Sheffield

Internationally and in Britain we have seen a rise in religious identities as a political identity by which individuals and groups organise. For British South Asians in particular, the rise of religious identities has impacted dramatically on the way in which young people define themselves and their communities. This is not the case in Pakistan or in parts of India. Both global and local events have played a fundamental role in the shifting of these identities. While religion has always played a significant role in sub-continental politics, for many of the second generation South Asians growing up in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s religion did not figure as the primary defining feature of their identity. The key issue was racism, which confronted them in school, on the streets, in where their families could live and work produced a broader anti-racist identity around which they organised. This paper will explore the political and cultural identities of the Asian Youth Movements as an example of a secular Asian identity, which flourished during the late 1970s and 1980s It is an identity which is not dead today. It argues in support of the social constructionist approach to the formation of collective identity, which challenges the assumptions

about the naturalness of categories, which we use to organise.¹ It will consider the historical context of the formation of the AYMs collective political identity and ask why this identity shattered so profoundly along ethnic and religious lines in the 1990s. This paper is based on material collected for Tandana-Glowworm, a digitised archive of political ephemera of the Asian Youth Movements. I will use documents published by the AYMs and key campaigns with which they were involved along with information from interviews with former AYM members to consider the political and cultural identities, which they formulated in order to struggle for a just world. In exploring the identities of the Asian Youth Movements. I will argue for the historical value of the black political identity and suggest that the criticisms levied against this identity do not consider the difference between the formations of resistance identities by disenfranchised people and the formation of legitimising identities. By ‘resistance identities’ I am refereeing to those identities generated by people in positions that are devalued and/or stigmatised by the logic of domination and therefore seek to build trenches of resistance in opposition to the permeating institutions of society. By ‘legitimising identities’, I refer to identities which are often state sponsored or hold interests in state approval for the purposes of funding.² Acknowledging these differences should enable us to understand the contexts within which the black political identity played a fundamentally progressive and important role.

Historical Background

In the 1950s and 60s mass migration from the Asian subcontinent and the Caribbean changed the face of Britain. Asians from India, Pakistan and Kashmir came to Britain

¹ See introduction and conclusion in Jackson, P & Penrose, J 1993, *Constructions of Race, Place and Nation*, UCL Press, London

² Castells, Manuel, 1997, *The Power of Identity*, Blackwells, Oxford p8

to work in factories and mills in order to fill job vacancies in the boom years of the 1960s.³ In the first generation and first wave of migration, it was mainly men who came to work and send money home to their families. As they began to establish themselves in Britain many brought their families over to be with them. By the late 1970s, the children of the first generation migrants, who were not necessarily born here, but who had spent formative years of their life in Britain were growing up. In the 1970s, East African Asians also migrated out of political necessity bringing their families with them. The reality of Britain was as great if not greater than the reality of return to their homelands. The desire to return was to be just that for most of the migrants. For those who had grown up in Britain, their immediate future was here. This future for many was riddled with racism in schools; in the houses they lived in, on the streets and in the forced separation of families through the increasingly stringent immigration laws.⁴ In school many young people had had to deal with racism –in the playground from racist violence but also in the educational system through 1) the policy of bussing children to others schools; 2) the racism of teaching systems which herded them into ESN classes; 3) the individual racism of class teachers who had low expectations of Asian children invariably entering Asian children into the lower level CSEs while their white compatriots would do O' Levels. In the process the education system denied many Asian children the ability to move up the educational ladder.⁵ While their parents had been paid less than white workers, often for doing the same jobs at unsociable hours, even this option was not necessarily open

³ For histories of this migration see Ramdin, Ron (1999) *Reimagining Britain: 500 years of Black and Asian history*, Pluto Press; Ramdin, Ron (1987) *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain*, Wildwood house; Fryer, Peter (1984) *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, Pluto Press.

⁴ Sivanandan, A 'Race, Class and the State: The Black Experience in Britain' *Race and Class*, vol XVII no 4, Spring 1976; Sivanandan, A 'From Immigration Control to "Induced Repatriation"', *Race and Class*, volXX no 1 Summer 1978. Both essays are reproduced in Sivanandan 1982, *A Different Hunger: Writings on Black Resistance* Pluto Press; Layton Henry, Zig 1992 *The Politics of Immigration: Immigration, 'race' and 'race' relations in post-war Britain* Blackwells

⁵ for an analysis of racism in the education system see Sarup, Madan 1986 *The Politics of Multiracial Education* Routledge; Sarup, Madan *Education and the ideologies of Racism*

to their children. The recession of the 1970s had led to factory closures in all of the industrial belts in Britain, where the majority of Asians had settled because of the prospects of work. Recession also brought the need for a scapegoat and Africans, Caribbeans and Asians all became targeted as scroungers from an over stretched National Health Service and social security system. Rising fascist and racist activity lead to increased attacks on black people on the streets⁶. The media also played their part by publishing articles highlighting individual cases of black families being supported by the social security system. While this formed a trickle before May 1976, on 4 May 1976 the Sun broke a story entitled: ‘Scandal of £600 a week immigrants’, the rest of the media jumped onto the bandwagon with a storm of head lines including ‘More on the Way’, ‘Asian Flood’ and ‘Asian Invasion’ to publicise the arrival of Uganda Asians after their expulsion from Uganda in 1976. On May 7th and May 12th racist murders took place on two Asians in the East End of London. Both were stabbed and neither was robbed. The motive was clearly racist.⁷

Then on Friday 4 June 1976, a month after the Sun’s article, Gurdip Singh Chaggar was killed by racists outside the Dominion Theatre in Southall. The Dominion Theatre was seen as a symbol of self-help and self-organisation by South Asians living there. The murder of Gurdip at this spot was read as a direct attack on the whole community. Robert Mark, Metropolitan Police Commissioner declared that the motive was not necessarily racist. The outrage of the community was voiced at a meeting organised by the Indian Workers Association on the following Sunday. Community leaders and elders responded to the agitation felt by the youth by passing a motion blaming the NF, politicians and the media for the present crisis. However,

⁶ I will use the term black as a political term to include all those of African and Asian origin.

⁷ Kala Tara, (1979) Bradford Asian Youth Movement, p 7

the youth wanted direct action. The youth marched to the police station demanding protection from racist violence and declared ‘We shall fight like lions’. The police station was surrounded; the youth staged a sit in refusing to leave until two Asian men that had been arrested during the commotion were released. They won their demands and held another meeting later in the evening to organise defence units. With this demonstration and show of force the Southall Youth Movement was born.⁸

The march of these young men, their determination and their anger was filmed and broadcast by the British media. It was to prove an inspiration to young Asians across the country. In Bradford the Indian Progressive Youth Association was formed and although this organisation was open to all South Asians, the conflicts over whether it was Indian or sub-continental led the organisation to dissolve itself about a year later to form the Asian Youth Movement, Bradford in 1978. In defining themselves as Asian, there was a conscious decision to find an identity, which would unify rather than be divisive. The formation of the Asian Youth Movement in Bradford was also an expression of the failure of white left organisations in Britain to address the issues that affected the Asian communities effectively. Three of the founding members of AYM, Bradford, left white left organisations namely, IS, Militant and RCG - buried their political differences in the wake of what they believed to be the immediate political needs of their community - to form an organisation which could voice their grievances and concerns.⁹ As Tariq recalls:

‘I remember being asked in IS to do a speech on the origins of racism. I was very young and I was clueless, they only asked me because I wasn’t white. I was groping for ideas and many of them were very articulate. I was very upset..... In

⁸ CARF (1981) *Southall: The Birth of a Black Community* IRR/Southall Rights

⁹ in conversation with Tariq Mehmood, member of AYM, Bradford, UBYL and leading defendant of the Bradford 12

our left organisations we were not doing anything for ourselves. Families were living in appalling conditions, divided by the racist immigration laws and the police were hassling us. We were being attacked by ‘Paki’ bashers and we were talking about an abstract revolution out there. We were revolutionaries and we were amongst the most oppressed section of the population in this country...and then there was the big Fascist march in Bradford. That shook us. We had nothing for ourselves. The way white comrades behaved – some of them didn’t turn up and others were in the wrong places. It had a big impact on us. We marched in the centre of town, but the Fascists were in Lumb Lane in Manningham. In the end we broke ranks with the community leaders and went to Manningham, all along we were fighting with police and some of us were arrested. Prison vans were overturned and friends released. Our lesson from this was the need for our own organisation. We all said we have to put out own house in order and unite as equals.’

As one of the earliest AYMs with experience of political organisation through their previous involvement in left organisations, they also worked to encourage others to organise. In 1978, the murder of Altab Ali in East London, galvanised youth there to organise their own defence in the formation of the Bangladeshi Youth Movement. Other cities also organised in the wake of increasing attacks. Eventually AYMs sprung up in East London, Luton, Nottingham, Leicester, Manchester, Sheffield, Burnley and Birmingham. There were even small movements in Burnley and Pendle, Luton and Watford.

AYM Identities

In exploring the political, and cultural identities of the AYM's it is important to recognise that like many movements the aims and objectives were not formulated at the beginning but emerged through social unrest, and developed slowly as the organisation became active and was formalised.¹⁰ From 1976 to 1979, we can see the development of the movement first in Southall after the social unrest caused by the death of Gurdip Singh Chaggar, and later the death of Blair Peach in 1979 at the hands of the police, when anti-fascist organisers including SYM tried to prevent a fascist meeting in Southall. Southall, although predominantly Sikh and Indian chose not to organise on religious or cultural lines and deliberately called themselves the Southall Youth Movement to include both South Asian, African and Caribbean youth. As Balraj Purewal comments, 'we called ourselves Southall Youth Movement, because we were not a minority in Southall, saying Asian made it sound like we were a special thing, but we were the youth of Southall'¹¹ The activities in Southall motivated other groups of South Asians to develop their own organisations. The importance of both non-relational methods such as the media and actual relational contacts such as family and friends can be seen here,¹² since many members have mentioned their determination to organise after seeing the actions of Southall youth on the TV. While Southall did not develop a specifically Asian movement, but rather a movement for all the youth of Southall, the burning need for independent black organisations developed over the next couple of years with the emergence of the Bradford Asian Youth Movement and the Bangladeshi Youth Movement in East London. The formation of the Bangladeshi Youth Movement should not be seen as in any way divisive, but

¹⁰ Blumer H 'Elementary Collective Groupings' in... p83

¹¹ in conversation with Balraj Purewal, founding member of Southall Youth Movement

¹² Mc Adam and Rucht 1993, 'The Cross-National Diffusion of Movement Ideas', *Annals AAPSS*, 528, July 1993, pp56-74

rather reflected the population living in East London. It was also a pride in their newly won independence. Although all these organisations were black led, none of them were exclusive or anti-white. All were happy to work with white anti-racists in promoting their cause.¹³

In the archival material collected for the Tandana project, the first developed public documents by an Asian Youth Movement appear after 1979.¹⁴ Although Bradford and Southall printed leaflets and posters for particular events, the first AYM magazine *Kala Tara*, was published in Bradford in 1979. In the following pages I will explore some of the magazines produced by the AYMs in Bradford, Manchester and Sheffield to reveal the political identities and affiliations of the movement, along with reference to discussions I have had with former AYM members. I will also discuss some of the literature and material produced by the Bradford 12 campaign (1981-2) since the 12 men on trial were all part of the United Black Youth League, a splinter group from the Asian Youth Movement in Bradford. The campaign therefore supports and represents many of the ideas and attitudes of the movement.

¹³ conversations with Tariq Mehmood, Matloob Hussain, AYM, Sheffield and Dilip Parmar, AYO, Bolton.

¹⁴ The Tandana-Glowworm project is archiving the material culture produced by the Asian Youth Movements and campaigns with which they were involved. www.tandana.org

KALA TARA

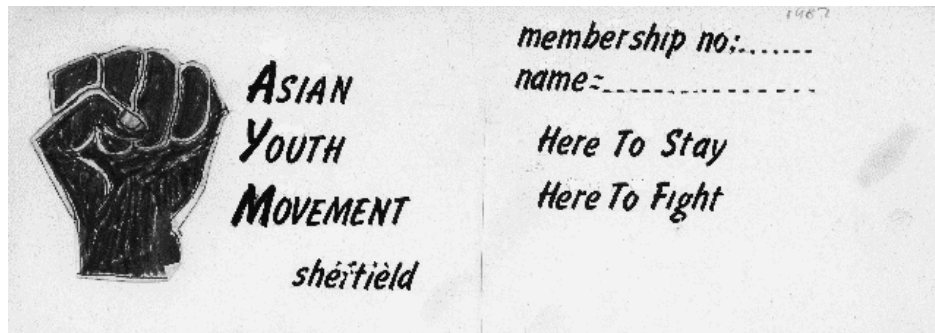
PAPER OF ASIAN YOUTH MOVEMENT BRADFORD, No. 1, 2009.



Kala Tara, produced by Bradford AYM can be seen as representative of the development of the AYMs from the early stages of social unrest and popular excitement to the stage of formalisation.¹⁵ The magazine documents some of the early activity of the youth movement and enables us to understand the identity that these Asian youth constructed for themselves in the late 1970s. The title *Kala Tara*, meaning Black Star, shows the identification that these youth had with wider black struggles. Although all those involved in the organisation were Asian, they saw themselves as black in a white society. They felt united with Africans and Caribbeans through the experience of racism and wished to express this outwardly. They did not see black as simply a skin colour, but a political position and this was an identity, which was mirrored amongst all the Asian Youth Movements nationally. The use of the fist as a logo showed their identification with wider struggles such the black power movement in America, a salute that the black power movement in its turn had taken from anti-colonial and anti-fascist struggles as can be seen through a logo from *United Africa*, a paper produced by the Organisation of African Unity in the early

¹⁵ Blumer, H 'Elementary Collective Groupings' in

1960s and from pro-republican literature and photographs of the Spanish Civil war.¹⁶



The symbol of the fist was also adopted by AYMs in Manchester and Sheffield on their badges and literature. In recollections of their past experience, Bhupinder has highlighted the influence of the black power and black consciousness movement on their sense of self and identity:

‘If you consider how the Black Panther party emerges, AYM was very similar. It wasn’t formalised to begin with but emerged slowly. We also adopted many of the rules from the Panthers: We would not criticise another black person in public for example, but the AYM like the Panthers had firm rules and if you infringed them you were taken to task. Once the AYM took me to task because of being drunk on AYM business.¹⁷

The concept of blackness with which the AYMs identified was the fermentation of a very British identity. In the US, black was interpreted to mean ‘of African origin’ and in the subcontinent no one would have defined themselves by their colour or for that

¹⁶ Ramamurthy and Adi 2005 ‘Fragments in the Visual Culture of Anti-Colonial Struggle’ in *Visual Culture and Decolonisation in Britain* Ashgate

¹⁷ Conversation with Bhupinder Bassi, member of AYM, Birmingham

matter as Asian. This identity was considered and thought through as the first page of *Kala Tara* articulates:

‘Racism is rampant and racists are on the rampage. The imminent economic slump will put our lives much more in jeopardy in this country. It is up to the black community as a whole to stand up and take the lead in the struggle against racism.’¹⁸

This black identity was profoundly secular. Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, Jains and others all worked together. As Anwar Qadir from Bradford recalls:

I grew up with my father talking to me about his youthful day’s “how when dipwali or dewily, basent, or the Eid’s were celebrated together in the community (not communities but community) and genuine love for each other” and my schooling was in such a schooling community. So when I joined the AYM this was a continuation of where I was coming from, attending meetings where people from all walks of life were coming together to campaign on issues around injustice to people.

I felt that we were also celebrating our coming together. Although the British Raj may have created the partition, we had brought our self’s back together by going to the immigration demo’s and mobilising the whole community to attend these events.’¹⁹

This experience and attitude is mirrored in recollections of Southall:

‘I had grown up in a profoundly secular environment. As a Punjabi I did not think about Muslim or Sikh. At school, the person next to me was never a Muslim or Hindu it never occurred to me to think like that.’²⁰

¹⁸ *Kala Tara* No1 p1

¹⁹ communication with Anwar Qadir, member of AYM, Bradford

²⁰ in conversation with Balraj Purewal, member of SYM.

The use of the term black, as the fermentation of a British identity recognised the imperative of their struggle against racism in order to ensure their access to basic rights in Britain. It was a term, which was used to highlight their recognition that colour in the 1970s and 1980s was a crucial part in the experience of racism in Britain. It was a recognition of the link between their own experience of racism in Britain and that of other black communities whose peoples were colonised by Britain.

The AYMs raised the issue of our existence and acknowledgment in Britain, the fact that we i.e. the second generation were an unhappy lot and that it is no longer acceptable to think that we would fear or tolerate their attitudes towards us, whether it be not letting a Rastafarian into school for the locks or a Sikh person not being allowed to work in a bakery.²¹

The right to live in Britain in peace and without victimisation was their primary concern, as the slogans, often repeated in magazines and leaflets indicate:

‘Come what may, we are here to stay’

‘Here to stay, here to fight’

The struggle against fascism was highlighted in the paper through the resistance to attacks in Southall and the protests at the death of Altab Ali in East London. State racism was highlighted and made personal in through campaigns against deportation and for the right of divided families to be united. *Kala Tara* highlighted the first campaigns of the AYM, Bradford against the deportation of Saeed Rahmon, a trade unionist. It also highlighted the victory of Abdul Azad in his struggle against deportation and exposed the state’s inhumanity with Anwar Ditta’s plight to bring her three young children to this country to live with her. The page depicting Anwar Ditta employed classic visual devices of poignant separation with the image of husband and

²¹ Conversation with Anwar Qadir, AYM, Bradford

wife alone at the top and the three children, immaculately dressed, silent, sombre and alone at the bottom of the page. Apart from focussing on the human tragedy of individual campaigns, the paper also highlighted the racism of both the Labour and the Tory parties' implementation of increasingly strict immigration laws and visualised the AYMs involvement in the struggle against them through photographs of pickets and the AYM Bradford banner on a national demonstration against racist immigration laws that had been organised in November 1978. These issues were ones faced by Africans, Asians and Caribbeans, the term black enabled a collective identity and solidarity to develop in the struggle against both the racism of the street and the institutional racism of the immigration laws.

Modood's attack on the construction of a black political identity in the early 1990s, was made when the political strength of organisations such as the Asian Youth Movements had collapsed, his attack on this identity he argues is not as a concept of identity but on its hegemony suggesting that it harms British Asians. Yet his argument rests primarily on the use of the term within the context of employment issues, ethnic minority monitoring and policy contexts.²² Modood's concerns are with the 'legitimising identities' of dominant institutions concerned to rationalise their domination over social actors. Modood suggests that the term privileges colour and ignores cultural racism.

‘ from an Asian point of view the black consciousness movement was in other ways less preferable to the earlier civic antiracism, for the assertive identity it promoted to unite the victims of racism focussed on colour. Ironically this was at a time when it was cultural racism that was on the increase, eclipsing other forms and when Asians were asking themselves what were the core identities

²² Modood, Tariq Nov 1994 **Political** blackness and British Asians *Sociology*, v28 n4 p859(18)

they felt were under threat and most worth preserving, and hence were least interested in defining themselves in terms of a global colour identity.²³

Yet for many AYM members there was little contradiction. As one AYM member has commented, ‘In the 1970s I was called a black bastard and a ‘Paki’, not a coloured bastard and very rarely was I called a Muslim.’²⁴ For the Asian Youth Movements the context was street politics, not the endless classification of the ethnic monitoring form and there was an undoubted validity in the term. Modood suggests that identity with the term black was one that was often imposed on Asians and is hegemonic: Yet for the Asian youth who identified with the AYMs of the late 1970s and early 1980s, a black identity was adopted with pride and was certainly not imposed. Bhupinder’s recollections above refer directly to the inspiration, which the Black Consciousness movement offered. For AYM members Black was a political identity. They did not see black as exclusive to other identities such as being Punjabi or Bengali nor did they believe that this identity conflicted with their religious beliefs. As Anwar recalls: ‘I am and will always be a Kashmiri but when you have a common enemy at the door then people have to unite to deal with the beast.’ Another crucial issue for the AYMs was the relationship between racism and class oppression. As Tariq mentions, ‘for us the issue was not skin deep, but was linked to issues of class. Most of us were workers and sons of workers. For us race and class were inseparable’. What ‘black’ allowed these second generation Asians was a framework within which to explore the increasing cultural hybridity of their lives. They searched out the progressive aspects of the cultures of South Asia and elsewhere.

²³ Modood, Tariq, 1997, ‘“Difference”, Cultural Racism and Anti-Racism’, in P. Werbner *Debating Cultural Hybridity*, Zed, London p 159

²⁴ conversation with Tariq Mehmood, member of AYM, Bradford, UBYL, and a leading defendant in Bradford 12

The youth movements did not have a romantic vision of their countries as holding a pre-colonial idyllic past. However they believed in the importance of encouraging co-operation between the various nationalities of the Indian sub-continent and perceived their cultures to be dynamic. They wished to promote and celebrate the progressive history and culture of their own communities and those of others. As Anwar from Bradford recalls:

‘We had education programmes that looked at where we came from in the last 3000 years, what happened in India over these periods. It was important to know where we were coming from before we started to challenge others.’²⁵

They produced leaflets in both English and their own languages and adopted slogans and songs in Urdu and Punjabi that were used by workers in the subcontinent.

‘Travelling to [demonstrations] was great; because we heard some old songs by the people in the coaches some of these people were involved in the liberation movement of Free India. The Indian Workers Association along with the Kashmiri workers and the Pakistani Workers Association, all came (as I would see it and may be I’m just an old romantic at heart) together in this struggle or it could be seen as a celebration once again of the unity.’²⁶

²⁵ communication with Anwar Qadir, AYM, Bradford

²⁶ communication with Anwar Qadir, AYM, Bradford

Birmingham AYM produced a calendar in 1986, which juxtaposed a photograph of the AYMs campaigns for self-defence and an aspect of progressive Indian history



through

a photograph of Uddam Singh the Indian freedom fighter who renamed himself Ram Mohammad Singh Azad as a statement of unity between the religious communities of South Asia when tried for treason in a British court after shooting General O'Dwyer who commanded the troops in Amristar that led to the murder of hundreds of innocent people at Jallianwalabag. The AYMs were proud of their cultures, adopting the use of the toll (drum) on demonstrations for example, and struggled for the rights of their religious observances to be recognised such as the campaign for halal meat in schools

in Bradford in 1984. In defending their communities members of the AYMs defended Temples, Mosques and Gurdwaras together unquestioningly.

The problems with the term 'black' are well identified by Floya Anthias et al: The problems arose when 'Blackness stopped to be politically just a category of resistance, and became also a system of power brokery; it stopped being just a form of solidarity and became also a divisive category in competing for and of holding on to funds and other resources'²⁷ It is the collapsing of blackness as a signifier into blackness as a sign that has created confusion and ambiguity.²⁸

Kala Tara reveals an identity which was both black and Marxist in its belief in the power of organising, its understanding of the state and its use of coercive organisations such as the police, and the understanding of the impact of the economic slump on the heightened racism of the period. In the aims and objectives listed in *Kala Tara* the AYM emphasises their belief in workers struggles and states that 'the only real force capable of fighting racialism and the growth of organised racism and fascism is the unity of the workers movement black and white' although they note at the same time the importance of recognising the racism of these workers organisations. The paper highlights the importance of organising after the murder of Blair Peach and the subsequent arrest of 700 people in Southall.²⁹ The community was on trial as an open door programme produced by the Southall Defence Committee and featured in *Kala Tara* suggests. AYM, Bradford published extracts of an interview from the video and printed three images to visually express their political perspective on the role of the police as an organ of the state - An injured but determined Southall

²⁷ Anthias and Yuval Davis, *Racialised Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the anti-racist struggle*, 1992, Routledge, p145

²⁸ *ibid*, p155

²⁹ CARF 1981 pp55-64

Youth Movement member was depicted at the top of the page speaking at a rally to visually represent the youth's resistance and determination to struggle for justice.

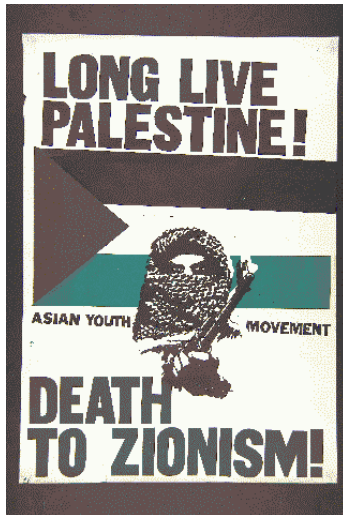
Below the murdered Blair Peach lay in his coffin and on the facing page the lines of unidentifiable policemen and horses acted to visualise the clinical force of the state.

The juxtaposition implied the culpability of not just the individual police officer but also the police force as a whole.



Kala Tara also highlighted the anti-imperialist and internationalist perspective of the AYMs³⁰ indicating that their political blackness was not blinkered and chauvinist but was in order to build solidarity. The final page was given over to voice their support for the North of England Irish Prisoners Committee, to which the AYM as they state sent two delegates. This support was indicative of their general support for struggles against all forms of colonialism including settler colonialism. Through the leaflets and posters extant in the archive, their support for Palestine and the anti-apartheid struggle are also voiced.

³⁰ This is also an issue emphasised in Kalra et al's article opcit



An exploration of literature produced by other AYM's indicates similar sets of political concerns and allegiances. Manchester AYM's magazine *Liberation* produced in April 1981 indicates support for a wide variety of black struggles. The magazine highlighted racism on the streets through coverage of the New Cross Massacre in which 13 African Caribbean teenagers were killed when a petrol bomb was thrown into a party, as well as the racism of the state through discussions about immigration laws and police racism. Again the issue of bringing African and Asian people together in the struggle against racism was paramount. The slogan 'here to stay here to fight' was again emblazoned on the cover of the magazine which highlights the victory of the AYM's campaign to bring Anwar Ditta's children to Britain

Liberation also articulated the need for an Asian Youth Movement and the importance of youth organisation. The subtitle to this article 'the fighting front against racism, fascism and neo-colonialism' shows a belief in the strategic role of youth in the anti-racist struggle and the anti-imperialist perspective of the movement, which was further articulated in the article. An article on Black Jews in Israel also indicated their interest in international struggles. The content of the paper was similar to *Kala Tara*, focussing on immigration issues, police violence and international issues. The

Manchester and Bradford AYMs clearly worked together on a number of campaigns as the case of Anwar Ditta highlights.

Manchester however, also tried to articulate support for women's struggles and Asian women's rights. One of the photographs feature Asian women marching and a section on women articulates Manchester AYMs position:

‘Asian women are the most oppressed section of our community, subjected to oppression at home in addition to the general exploitation as blacks. Although we are living in an industrialised society, most of our people retain feudal values and customs. AYM will struggle against these reactionary aspects of our culture. AYM believes that the emancipation of women is a pre-requisite for the liberation of society at large.’³¹

Manchester also developed a symbolic image that was used on their membership application forms which depicts an Asian woman participating in the struggle. It is clear that each AYM, while working and collaborating with each other, retained specific individual features as can often be detected in social movement organisations. While Manchester AYM attempted to address the women's question and the other AYMs also addressed these issues theoretically, making links with groups such as the wages for housework campaign, the majority of membership to the AYMs was male and there was a distinct masculine culture that surrounded the organisation. Members of Birmingham Black Sisters for example renamed Birmingham Asian Youth Movement the Asian Young Men's Association³² and members of this movement recognise that they did not have a culture in the organisation that enabled women to participate equally, since they met in pubs and clubs socially which many women

³¹ *Liberation*, April 1981, p6

³² in conversation with Shirin Housee, member of Birmingham Black Sisters

would not wish to do. It is clear that the black identity that they forged was in many senses uncompromisingly male. This is also detectable visually in images such as the angry young man image, which is used repeatedly in AYM literature, first in *Kala Tara*, and then on an early Bulletin from the July the 11 Action Committee and later in 1985 in agitational leaflets in support of the miners struggle by Sheffield AYM.



The repeated use of such an image shows a clear identification with a culture of masculinity. Politically, however, they tried to support campaigns that Birmingham Black Sisters for example helped to organise, in support of women such as Balwant Kaur murdered as a result of domestic violence and Iqbal Begum jailed for killing her husband after suffering years of domestic violence. There was also a class issue that Sheera from BAYM notes. Many, although not all of the members of BAYM were

working class in origin. The women in BBS were mostly educated middle class women.

‘Birmingham Black Sisters always saw us men as at fault but there was a class issue. In the Kewal Brothers strike, Birmingham Black Sisters wanted to organise the women separately, which caused divisions. We felt that it was imperative that all the workers were together. We had a committee with various organisations and we organised funds and meetings.’³³

The case of the Bradford 12 provides evidence of the influence of the political identity forged by the AYMs. Three months after the publication of *Liberation*, on the 11 July 1981, Britain was shook by rebellions in most major cities. The rebellions led to the arrest of hundreds of youth up and down the country, including members of the United Black Youth League, which had recently been formed in Bradford after a split in the Bradford Asian Youth Movement over the issue of state funding and the inevitable cooption into state led agendas, which this would cause. Members of the UBYL were released but arrested again a month later. In the end 12 young men in Bradford were charged with conspiracy to cause explosives and endanger lives. This was to have a significant impact on the organisation of Asian youth throughout the country. The black communities and anti-racists generally galvanised support for the twelve in a trial that was to make legal history in asserting the right of a community to self-defence. For many the trial was seen as a political battleground between the police, the state and the right of black political organisation and collective self-defence. The extent of archival material found in all major cities in the collection of AYM members and others show the breadth of support offered to the Bradford 12

³³ conversation with Sheera

defence campaign. This support was not limited to the Asian community but was wide spread including black activists from a wide cultural spectrum and from white anti-racists. The power of a collective black political identity was valuable in the mobilisation of support nationally. A UBYL statement at the beginning of the case urged support for the twelve precisely because of the support they had given others:

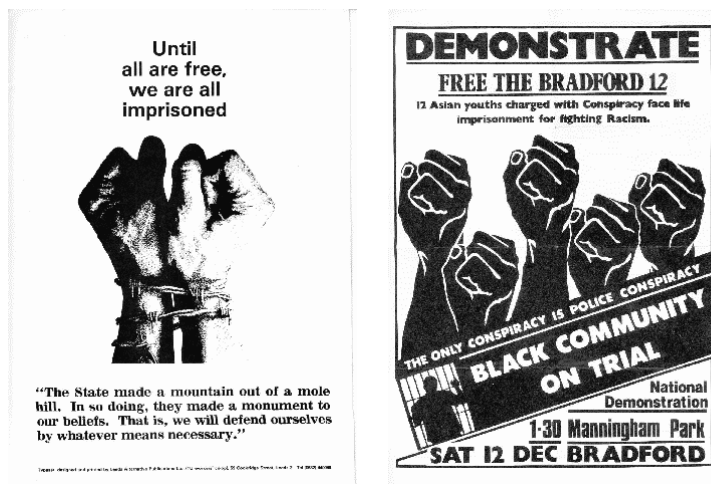
Our fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers are attacked and murdered in the streets. The police do nothing. Our homes and places of worship are burned to the ground. Nobody is arrested. Families are burned to death. The murderers and fire bombers speak openly of their organised violence against our communities. They are not charged with conspiracy. The politicians and police have failed us. Our youth are our only protection. These young men defended Anwar Ditta, Jaswinder Kaur, Gary Pemberton and many others. Now they have been taken away from us. We must not fail them. We must fight to bring them back. They have defended our community. We must now defend them.³⁴

The political black identity of the AYMs and the short-lived UBYL was neither exclusive nor so oppressive as to deny them mass support. As the civil rights solicitor Ruth Bundy has recently reflected on the difference between the support for the Bradford 12 and support for activists now, 'they were the sons of the community, that were on trial'.³⁵ The Bradford 12 campaign was to motivate individuals who had not formerly been involved in politics to organise in support of the twelve. One man who would later become a key organiser within AYM Sheffield recalled how moved he had been on seeing the poster of fists entwined in barbed wire with the slogan, 'Until

³⁴ reproduced in *Self Defence is no Offence: The Bradford 12 are free* 1982, Leeds Other Paper p3

³⁵ conversation with Ruth Bundy

all are free, we are all imprisoned'.³⁶ This image and slogan must have had a depth of meaning for many. In *Kala Tara* and *Liberation*, the fist had stood proud and independent as in anti fascist and anti-colonial literature decades earlier. In 1981 it was imprisoned. Some of the men who had been instrumental in encouraging others to raise their fist in resistance to street and state racism were inside. The community and anti-racists across Britain mobilised to ensure that their voice was heard. There was 'no conspiracy, but police conspiracy' as one of the slogans asserted. The campaign produced dozens of leaflets in a variety of languages; the raised fist was reproduced in another Bradford Twelve poster, not singular and iconic, but together with other raised fists in a symbol of collective defiance against the state's oppression.



The Bradford 12 campaign, although much broader than the Asian Youth Movements by necessity, expressed support for the ideals and positions of the AYM as exemplified in *Kala Tara* and *Liberation*. Apart from the adoption of the black power fist, which I have discussed above, other images from *Kala Tara* were also recycled in Bradford 12 bulletins. The photograph of the angry young man on Brick Lane referred to earlier was re-worked on an image on one of the Bradford 12 Bulletins to symbolise the campaign and their determination for the release of the men.³⁷ The

³⁶ conversation with Mukhtar Dar, member of AYM, Sheffield

³⁷ Bulletin of July 11 Action Committee, September 1981, p7

internationalism of the campaign can be seen in the adoption of an image from a Mexican resistance poster (a copy of which was reproduced in Gary Yanker's *Prop Art* published in 1972 and therefore must have been in circulation) for the poster 'Gagged', to represent the police restrictions on the 12 who were not allowed to attend or take part in any political meetings.³⁸ The poster depicted a black face with



its mouth in chains. In its imagery and its messages, the Bradford 12 campaign appeared to reinforce the legitimacy of the ideas and ideals of the Asian Youth Movements, - their determination to fight against state and street racism and their solidarity with international struggles. The eventual acquittal of the 12 men proved the right of self defence not simply to mean the defence of ones own person, but the right of a community to defend itself. This identification with the community, the affirmation of collective identity, which was so fundamental to the trial further

³⁸ Yanker, Gary *Prop Art*, 1972

entrenches the value of the AYM identity which was firmly linked to a secular and political black identity. As one of the leading defendants stated after their acquittal: ‘The state made a mountain out of a mole hill and in so doing made a monument to our beliefs, that is we will defend ourselves by whatever means necessary.’³⁹

The issue of self-defence that the Bradford 12 case raised was to be taken up by AYMs and related defence campaigns repeatedly after their acquittal. The impact of the Bradford 12 case on AYM Sheffield can be seen visually by the use of the Bradford 12 image of imprisoned fists for a local defence campaign in Sheffield, the



Ahmed Khan Defence Campaign. The Ahmed Khan Defence Campaign helped to establish a Sheffield AYM. The experience of Bradford had proved the need for Asian youth in Sheffield to organise. Like Bradford and Manchester before them, Sheffield also produced a magazine to outline their aims and raise awareness of other

³⁹ *Self Defence is no Offence: The Bradford 12 are free* 1982, Leeds Other Paper p24

campaigns. *Kala Mazdoor* (Black Worker) published in 1983, again indicated in its title both the continuing identity by a large group of young Asians with being black in a white society as well as the importance of identification with and support for workers struggles. Like the previous groups they saw the importance of organised resistance and reiterated in their magazine the words from *Liberation*:

‘Spontaneous struggle is not enough, an organised response to racism is essential to our future life in this country.’⁴⁰

Articles on the Newham 8, the case of eight youth who defended themselves against an attack by three plain-clothes police officers and on Colin Roach, who died in the foyer of Stoke Newington police station, advocated unity between black struggles. In the magazine and in leaflets in support of the two campaigns the slogan ‘one struggle one fight’ was repeatedly used. The level of solidarity between the two campaigns even led to combined activities to highlight police racism as the cause for both outrages as is documented in leaflets from the Sheffield AYM collection. Space in *Kala Mazdoor* was also given to publicise anti-deportation cases including Afia Begum from Bangladesh and Halimat Babamba from Nigeria. The case of the Aire Valley Yarns strike was also highlighted, - a strike for union recognition and reinstatement for which Asian workers at a factory in Leeds were fighting and to which AYM members in Sheffield and Bradford gave their support. The issues and perspectives of Sheffield can be seen as very similar to those in Bradford, although this first issue of *Kala Mazdoor* had no article on international struggles.

Kala Mazdoor, produced in 1983, also shows the changing nature of the struggle, which the AYMs felt confronted with by the mid 1980s. An extensive article on the CRE (the Commission for Racial Equality) set up the year of Chaggar’s murder in

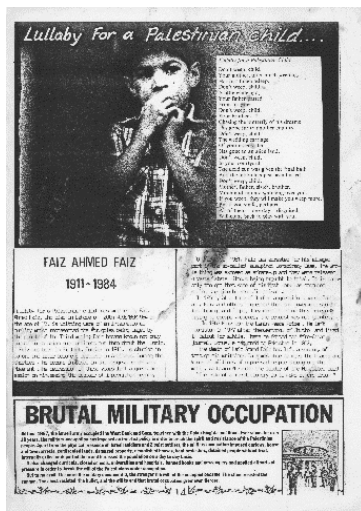
⁴⁰ *Kala Mazdoor* No1 p2 and *Liberation* p5

1976, was written to expose the organisation as a pacificatory one that was not designed to struggle for black rights. *Kala Mazdoor* also included articles on racism in the educational system and a review of a new book by A Sivanandan entitled *From Resistance to Rebellion*, which charted some of the struggles in the previous years. A Birmingham AYM member described Sivanandan and the ideological position of the IRR as representing the AYM perspective and beliefs:

‘There is a part of that book [*A Different Hunger*], where he invites the black intellectual home. I only ever met him once or twice but we used the words of Siva at meetings. I remember one of the metaphors from Siva’s book, which we used frequently to criticise the politics of the CRE: equal opportunities was like first beating someone up so they can’t walk and then giving them crutches.’

Kala Mazdoor also included a poem ‘Just Another Asian’. The inclusion of the poem is indicative of the importance of cultural production to the AYM in Sheffield. Out of all the AYMs Sheffield gave most thought to this issue. They organised an evening of cultural resistance and camping trips with entertainment. They produced memorable and powerful banners as well as agitational leaflets such a leaflet advocating solidarity

with the miners and a leaflet on self-defence. The second issue of *Kala Mazdoor*



included even more examples of cultural production with AYM poetry, the poetry of the Pakistani revolutionary poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz as well as the employment of visuals and graphics on every page. The second issue, unlike the first, also included a substantial section on international struggles. Sheffield's commitment to international issues is also perceivable in another bulletin that they produced entitled *Kala Shoor*, which literally means black noise but was interpreted in its subtitle as black consciousness. This bulletin highlighted tragedies such as the Bhopal disaster and advocated the right of the victims for compensation and justice.

By 1985, when the second issue of *Kala Mazdoor* was produced, Birmingham too had an active Asian Youth Movement, and the case of the Newham 7, another case of self-defence against racist violence, motivated and galvanised support of youth across the country. Within the context of the youth movements and their political struggles the political identity fostered by the AYM members who were determined to struggle for justice both in Britain and abroad was valuable and justifiable. Yet within a couple of years, all the youth movements had ceased to operate actively or had reorganised into other groups such as the Sheffield Defence Campaign. The files of Sheffield and Bradford disintegrate after 1987. By 1989, only two years later, the Rushdie Affair was to drive activity along much more communal lines.

Conclusion

Why did the organisations and ideas they represented lose political influence so rapidly during the late 1980s? Firstly it is important to note that key members of the AYMs and UBYL in developing their political perspectives and attitudes as they grew up began to change their central political commitments. For some members, as anti-imperialists in organisations that were campaigning on predominantly anti-racist issues posed a contradiction and they chose to join or establish organisations in which their commitment to international issues particularly their concern with their 'home' countries could be more clearly developed. Members of the AYMs later joined the Indian Workers Association and the Pakistani Workers Association. Others sold out, joining the Labour Party.

However, on reflection of the demise of the AYMs, Bhupinder notes:

‘the most significant factor.... has to be what the state did. It divided communities. Today where we sit I believe it is very difficult to create a black consciousness in our communities. ... It is not possible to see it like that now.’⁴¹

The state co-option of black activists through increased funding to the black communities took place systematically following the Scarman Report which clearly stated the need to tackle the issues of social deprivation and inequality in order to prevent the influence of radical activists on minority communities. Within the context of state funding the resistance identity of political blackness was reinterpreted into a series of legitimising identities, which needed to re-focus the meaning of black within a cultural domain. The AYMs themselves fell into the trap of funding, setting up community centres. As a member from Manchester reflected on why she left:

‘the group’s time was taken up by organising activities to fulfil the criterion of the funding e.g. outings, youth centre sessions, playing pool, table tennis and management of the project itself.’⁴² Others from Bradford recall on how ‘it was not a group with teeth anymore’⁴³ and they ‘did not want to get used in the drive towards providing fodder for the Labour Party’⁴⁴ (an organisation which they had previously opposed vociferously), after one member, now Marsha Singh MP began to campaign for a parliamentary position. As Mukhtar Dar, an artist who worked with AYM, Sheffield reflected:

What is significant is the process by which the AYMs symbolic Black secular clenched fist - split open into a submissive ethnic hand with its divided religious fingers holding up the begging bowl for the race relation crumbs.⁴⁵

⁴¹ conversation with Bhopinder Bassi, AYM Birmingham

⁴² in conversation with Nilofer Shaikh

⁴³ communication with Anwar Qadir.

⁴⁴ In conversation with Jani Rashid

⁴⁵ communication with Mukhtar Dar.

The AYMs and the literature which they produced remain a powerful legacy of the value of political blackness as a resistant identity, not simply in its ability enable the unity between Africans and Asians but also in its ability to galvanise the children of the early South Asian migrants to support each other despite religious and national differences and to organise on secular lines during a period in which racism was defined much more firmly along lines of colour as opposed to religious identities. The issue of colour is still a factor in both institutional and other forms of racism. The role of the state in dividing communities through the scramble over funding can be seen as part of the reason for the cementing of divisions, but the changing global situation, the fragmentation of identities along more communal lines internationally, with the Anglo-American rise in Christian fundamentalism, the rise of the Hindutva in India, along with the rise of Islamicism (partly fostered by the funding of right wing Islamic groups by the Americans over the past thirty years) has also made it harder for a black political identity to have currency today. As Sivanandan commented at a meeting in protest at the Gulf War ‘We are all Muslims now’.