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'YOU'RE DIFFERENT: YOU'RE ONE OF US' THE MAKING OF A BRITISH ASIAN

What follows is an extract from a remarkable three-hour interview which I carried out in March 1985, as part of the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit's long-running oral history and photographic project focussing on the experiences of Non-European migrants to the city. The interviewee, a Sikh man, was born in 1954 in the Punjab district of India and wishes to remain anonymous.

True to the typical pattern of Asian migration to Bradford, his father had come to work several years prior to the rest of the family's arrival to settle in 1956. The mid — 1950's was the beginning of a period of mass migration to Bradford. Many came in response to recruiting campaigns by a textile industry facing difficulties operating the 24 hour system that was essential to maximise the industry's return on post-war capital investments in new equipment. Today there are around 55,000 South Asians in Bradford, comprising 36,000 from Pakistan, 15,000 from India and 3,000 from Bangladesh. Many have settled in traditional areas of migrant settlement like Manningham Lane, Leeds Road, Bradford Moor and Little Horton, where the city's first Irish settlers lived from the 1830's.

The interviewee was brought up in Manningham and as one of the first Asian children to enter Bradford's education system, he is able to highlight the changes in policy and attitudes as more migrants arrived and as younger Asians began to respond to the emergence of overt racism and discrimination.

Robert Perks, July 1987.

... As a child, a young child, I never realised I was an Asian kid, the only Asian kid in the school or one of very few, and... the earliest memory I have of realising that I was different was actually when more people had come across and there were more families and things settling in, and that's probably when I was about twelve. And there was some discussion started by the teacher, or the teacher was pointing to somebody, and she was trying to convince the pupils, or try to tell them that all human beings are the same, and they shouldn't have these prejudices and if you think they smell, Japanese people think we smell because we smell of meat because we eat meat. And its ... and I became conscious then actually, you know, I felt embarrassed, and I felt very conscious that somehow I was different. You know ...

Not until then?

No, not until then.

So was it a change in attitude amongst the people around you, or in yourself?

First of all I think it was a change in attitude in people around me er ... not to me, I mean I don't ... not to me at that stage, or not to me ever actually, because one of the things I remember, and other Asian youngsters will say this, is that the other used to comment at all 'Oh I didn't mean you', after making a sort of ... 'you're all right', you know, 'you're one of us'. So it wasn't to me ... but it was, it was reaction towards others that started coming out, because ... now there were others. And unfortunately there's a connection between me and those others which I couldn't escape even though they themselves tried to say 'Oh it doesn't affect you because you're one of us'.

Because of your colour?

Yes, that's right, but obviously I wasn't one of them because I, it hurt me to hear these comments made about other people, and I could have ignored them but, not, you know ... it became difficult.

What about the people, the kids that you played with in the street and so on?

Early on they would have all been white, ordinary English kids, and we were just kids and we were just playing. Later on our street became very multi-racial. White families, families from Pakistan, Gujerati

families from India, and the one thing I can remember is that it was a very, very happy street, really happy. I mean people knew each other on the street, and em ... whether they were Indians, Pakistani, or whatever, people got on. I mean I can remember summer days in our back garden where there'd be loads of women from the whole street sat in the back garden, just talking or knitting or whatever, no matter what religion they were or anything. So it was a really really happy street.

I mean this sort of getting on together, did that go for the white people in the street as well?

Em ... obviously I think gradually white people started lessening in the street as other people started, from Asia, started buying the houses, but generally speaking, yes. I mean ... I mean there were one or two incidents of kids breaking windows or whatever, and arguments or squabbles, but generally speaking I don't think there were any problems, but as I say the street did become more and more Asian as time went on, as people moved out. Em ... but I mean there were streets around as well, not just on Thorne Terrace, you know, there's Burlington Terrace, there was Cliffe Terrace, and there was a street further down from us. I mean it was, the whole area was a kind of a, you know, a community where people, most people knew each other and, yes there didn't seem to be any problems really of racialism, or, or things. I think most people did get on. As I say, I mean I was far more interested in causing mischief or whatever, that time, you know. What we'd do is the, ... outside the back gardens where the toilets were, you had middens, toilet in one and the coal shed in the other, and we used to go jumping from one to the other, and the angry householder would come out and start swearing and shouting you know. And my own parents would say 'you're going to break your neck', you know, but they couldn't get hold of you really. Em ... I mean there's a, I mean the only, the only bad thing I suppose was the beatings I used to get from my father, basically because I mean I, I didn't pay a blind bit of notice I expect to what he was saying, or what my mother would say. I used to come in at all hours you see. I mean, apart from it was safe, there was no fear in terms of children playing out apart from the fact that they might cause themselves an injury by jumping on these middens and things, there was no fear from anybody that you know, 'We've got to get them in'. I mean, and I was particularly bad, I used to come in you know when it was really dark sometimes. I used to shin up the drainpipe, get in the bathroom and pretend I'd been in all the time. And my father used to work nights, and my mother would keep ... when she got fed up, on Saturdays she'd just tell him, and I *knew* she'd tell him, and I *knew* I'd get a beating so I used to do everything I could because there was only one beating involved. And to keep me in he used to tie me up sometimes actually as a punishment, because once I was out I was just gone, I mean. We used to have little gangs of kids you see, and sort of roam around everywhere, you know. We went up to Bolton Wood village and up those quarries and things, and once I remember leaving ... my youngest brother you see was always a problem, they always follow you around, and he got left in the village somewhere up there once, and of course there was some sort of fight between everybody and they all split up into two groups, and he got left in the middle and a policeman had to bring him back, and I got a beating for that as well, which you know, I expected ... (laughs) ... It was awful really, er ...

Did you get sort of in trouble with the police then when you were with the gang?

No, it wasn't that kind of, it wasn't that kind of thing really. The things we used to do were more, you know, mischievous, but we were afraid of policemen, you know, and I can't remember a policeman actually being bad you know, with us. I mean ... I remember once when we were, there are allotments down on Valley Road, just over the wall, and there's a railway line, and one thing we used to do was, you know, raid those allotments of strawberries and things and ... After one particular successful raid we were just walking up the bank to the wall again and this policeman saw us and said "Come up here", and I can remember chucking everything out of my pockets right, as he walked up. And I think he just gave us a good scolding, and that was it. I remember when my brother was reported, you know, when a police brought him back once after he'd been knocking down some walls or something, but, you know he was far more scared, you know, the policeman knew that my father would give him sufficient of a 'bollocking' for him not to do it again. So no, it was ... not in trouble with the police, and I suppose we didn't do things like vandalism on purpose, or, you know ... we didn't go round breaking windows on purpose, for the sake of ... I mean if there was an old house we'd enter the old house and make it a den or something, and might just smash it up a bit or whatever but that was just what it was.



St. Jude's Immigrant Centre, Bradford, early 1960s. (BHRU)

Talking about Belle Vue school, and presuming that the period you were at Belle Vue was a time when the Asian community was growing in Bradford, what sort of changes were you aware of at that time?

Numbers, I mean I became aware of numbers at Frizinghall Junior and I continued at Belle Vue, and it's around that time as I say that my own identity started clarifying a little bit. It clarified a lot more later on actually. I mean I can remember a very interesting thing which happened. I mean I were always a bit aggressive as a child. I don't know why, I mean, I'm not now, but as a child I always was a bit aggressive, and you know, when you are aggressive, I mean you've got 'Cocks of the School', and things like that. And, er ... although I was never regarded as that I think people just didn't bother me because they knew I'd fight back. Whether that was something which I'm now aware of that I'd had to do that to establish some kind of respect subconsciously as the only Asian child there, I don't know. That may be a fact ... I used to get in a lot of fights actually at Green Lane, I mean that's one thing that I remember.

Can you remember why, what you'd fight about?

No, I can't really remember why. Mostly it was probably silly arguments or some, some need in me to

establish my own kind of stance or respect. I mean I used to come home fighting all the kids with black eyes and everything quite regular, and then get a beating from my dad as well for being in a fight. You know, I mean, I remember quite often after school you know, being involved in scraps, and the ... interesting, and one of the interesting ones I'm telling you about, a prize one was ... You see having been there so long and already speaking English and being academic, I used to be in a higher class than most of the other Asians. And when they first — I never noticed it before but when they started coming in they'd be learning English or something and they'd be in a lower class. And my friends were already there, I mean like Derek I used to go to school with and somebody else used to come from round our area, and most of them in a sense used to be white or there used to be some Asians, so ... I think they went to different schools. Most of them used to be white. And the Asian kids, there were a few problems here. One was that I wasn't a Muslim, I was a Sikh, and they were far more aware of that than I was because they'd just come from Pakistan. Me being brought up here, I mean I didn't have a clue about what the problem was between Sikhs and Muslims or anything. It didn't you know, it just didn't ... I wasn't aware of the ... but *they* were, and er ... so, you know, and partly because I'd got white friends, you know they began to have some antipathy towards me sometimes; and one day one of these lads was picking on ... (and some of these lads were quite ... much older than we were actually because I think they'd just been stuck into that school for want of somewhere else to put them, but they weren't the right age. But they had to learn English or something so they were there. So you know they were a lot bigger than some of us there). One day one of these lads was picking on Derek who as I say was one of my best friends, and er ... I went into defend him I said 'Hey', you know, and this person was a bit scared of me. I think I must have hit him or something and he backed off. But he had a friend called Johnny and his family's been here quite a long time as well. Now, so what ... it was basically a fight between us two, and he was being egged on by these other people, and we went and fought it out, and I still ... and we're best friends still to this day actually, me and this Johnny after that incident. But he was telling me that, you know, they were all pushing .. part of the egging on was that I was a Sikh who hung round with English kids, and you know 'You should fight him as a Muslim'. And they wanted him to do it again, but he told them to, to get lost actually, eventually. So you know I was aware of those things happening, but I wasn't really part and parcel of that group of people.

And then on the other hand did British people look at you as a different sort of Asian?

In one sense they did because I mean most of these lads, you know, spoke very little English and I did, and I spoke probably with a, with a natural ease you know, virtually having been born in this country. And that's partly the thing you know, 'You're different, you're all right', syndrome. But in respect of that, in respect of the fact that I was aware, becoming aware that there was something wrong with, you know, they didn't consider me part of them, it still didn't help me when comments were made about other Asian people, because I still wasn't totally aware of what the things were, and what the difficulties were. And, you know ... at Belle Vue yes, there was a lot more Asian people there, and there was Asian boys there and there was something called the 'Immigrant Hut', where Asian boys went to learn English. And there were white boys coming from all kinds of ways and there were obviously a lot more comments which I became more and more aware of. And even there I had to have one or two fights to establish my credibility before ... after that I wasn't really bothered by anybody... and again things which had begun to develop at Frizinghall, which were end of term fights between Asian boys and white boys, and boys coming from other schools. And I can remember vividly at Belle Vue one time when the Asian boys had to band together and march down the road as a phalanx column, I mean it was a phalanx virtually, to ensure their own safety. And I can also remember now, we're into the early 'seventies, and in 'sixty-eight I can remember things about skinheads coming to Bradford in 'seventy-one and, and beating up Asians and black people. And I can remember, you know, things about repatriation, and I can remember leaflets going round school which were from something called the, was it 'The Yorkshire Campaign against Immigrants'? Things like, which said things like 'If you sit against, sit next to an Asian in a class you are bound to catch smallpox', and things like this. So yes, I was becoming more and more aware of myself, what I was, and, and these things that were happening, and I was ...

Did you suffer anything personally?

Er What .. a couple of things which, I mean, I feel slightly bad about, which were really I think institutional things rather than anything else, but, I mean, when I left Frizinghall, when I left Green Lane and went to Frizinghall, although in Green Lane I was in the top five, at Frizinghall I was put in the second stream, not the top stream, and I had to do well in the Christmas exams and got in the top stream. In



Demonstration, Bradford, February 1973. (BHRU)

Frizinghall, at the final exams, I came second through out the whole school, because I was (inaudible) ... common, and second in the top stream, and when I went to Belle Vue I was put in the third stream. And even my deputy headmistress made a fuss about that, but they didn't move me to the top stream where I felt I naturally belonged. And then, I mean, I put down an option for a language because I came top in French. You see my interest in languages was already developing, and ... I got left with a choice of er ... handicraft, which I was useless at, woodwork, which I hated, and music right, which I ... (laughs) ... again, you know, I wasn't interested in the slightest. And, and not German which I wanted to do as my other option. And eventually I had to go just stand in the German queue and just join the class to get in, and as I say I went to do 'A' Level. And again at the Christmas exams I had to prove myself again, to get into the top stream, which I did. But I mean I couldn't understand that at all. Personally I think, you know I'm on a different level. I mean obviously I've had things shouted at me, not by people I know, but other people you know ... 'Wog' or, or whatever, and things which hurt and things which I'd turn round and be ready to fight people ... at that stage of my life anyway. And I'm sure, I mean I can't clearly remember, but I'm sure I must have got into one or two situations because of that. I remember once in the dinner queue, em ... I was just sat down eating as the queue was going by, and it, it's a remark .. it's something and nothing, but I can remember the other person saying you know, he was stood up because he was in the queue and I was eating, he said 'Well chop-chop', in a very funny accent, and I took that as a racist remark, and I stood up immediately and I think I threw a glass of water over him or something, but I can remember that kind of thing happening. And I was ready, you know, ready to fight it out at any time.

And had the sort of incident increased in number, or had there been a change?

I think it's rather, rather increased, well, between my time at Frizinghall and Belle Vue that the kind of thing had started happening. I mean I wasn't aware of it happening. I'm sure it did but I wasn't you know, maybe I just, I can't remember it, I maybe just hid it because I can't remember exactly what I used to get into all these fights about now. Er ... but certainly it started happening, and I started becoming aware, consciously, of these things, em ... and I can't really say

I suppose what I'm really getting at is was there a change in British attitudes to the community in that sort of period, and if so, why?

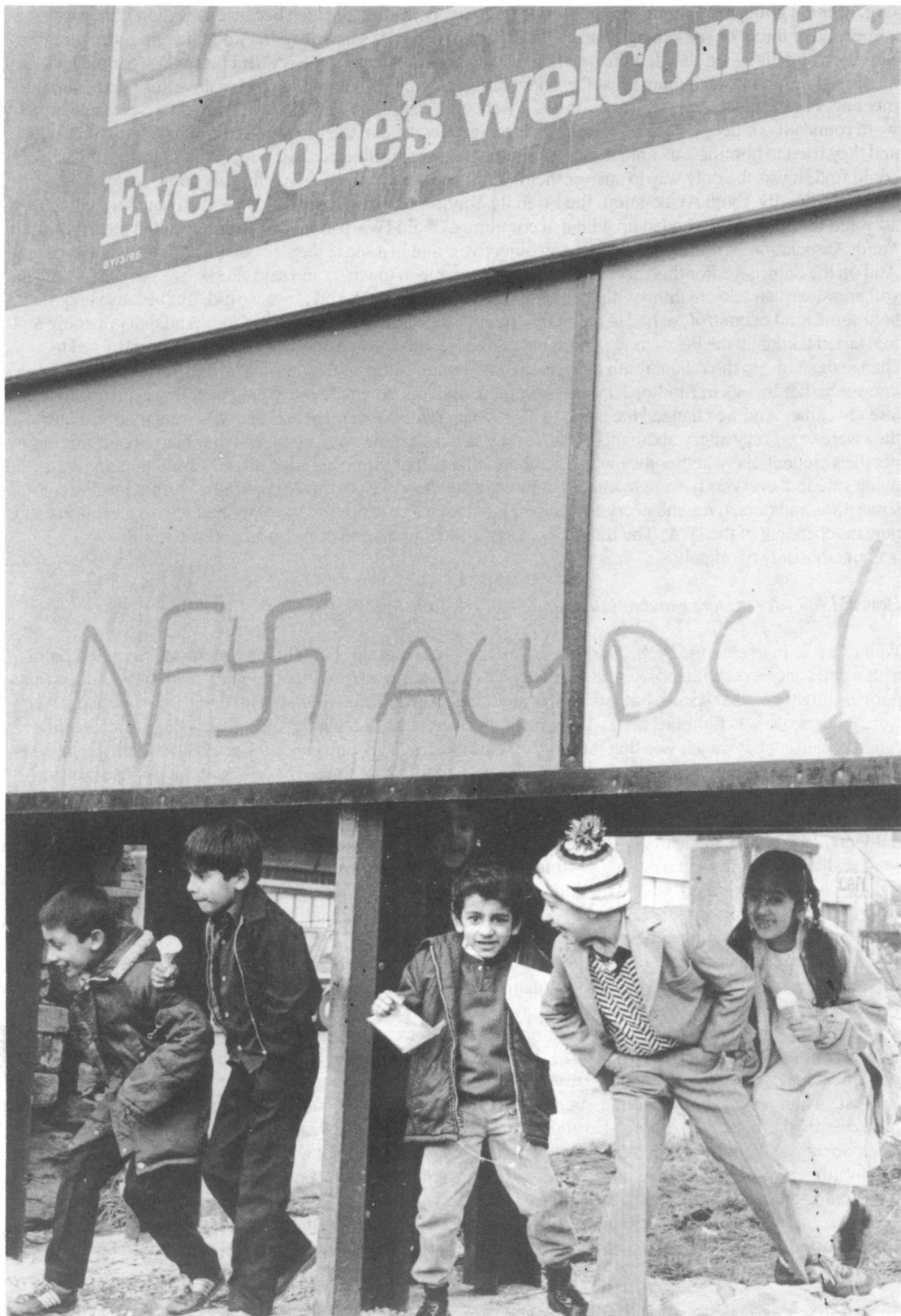
I think there was, yes. Er ... if I look at it now I think when we were first in England I think we were just regarded as a, you know, kind of oddity you know. 'These foreign friends', you know. And I think what had happened now was we just became foreign, and I think the friends bit disappeared, er ... really. And I think, you know, and I remember there being these speeches and things, and Immigration Acts and things, and people were a lot more aware of immigration. I think when we came I don't think anybody was aware of anything, and there was a lot more people coming in. And, er ... and as I say with things like the 'Immigrant Hut', which it was called commonly, everybody called it that. And I think yes, there was a, a change in attitude I think, and I think it's linked to a number of political things which have been happening. And ... there I wasn't obviously too politically aware, but I mean I became more and more politically aware, I mean to the fact that now I'm you know, when I left, when I went to university I became more and more politically aware, till, you know, I came back to Bradford and formed an organisation specifically designed. It was the Asian Youth Movement, it was specifically designed to say 'Look, we're Asian and proud of it, and we're going to fight racism'.

All right ... I want to come onto that in a second if I could. Em ... when, at what point did you become aware of, of political feelings if you like?

My first political feelings that I can remember, are quite young. I must have been thirteen or fourteen. I was watching a programme on television about Indian Maharajahs, and the kind of salaries they were getting from the state and everything and their life-style. And I can remember getting very, very angry about that, and saying so to my mother that you know, this shouldn't be allowed when people are starving and things. I think that's one of my first kind of political expressions, and that was very young as I say. And, er ... later on I became more and more political, but it was very confusing actually ... em ... In the 'seventy-one, 'seventy-two miners' strike I was still at school, and I can remember being very 'anti-miner' then, but ... so that was, it was a contradictory thing, but I went through some kind of transformation between then and university, and I think university tends to radicalise some people anyway, and I think I went through that process as well ... Just to go back a bit, I mean in terms of when I started taking note of politics to do with race, em ... during the ... I mean when was the Ugandan crisis? early seventies, then there was the Malawi Asian one, and the way the press had dealt with that had begun to put an impact on me, and also interested me in immigration control and immigration laws, and how they were affecting things. So that was already coming into my consciousness, and it's one of the things that we discussed when we met. We ... we all agreed on the need to form something in 'seventy-six, and I don't think we did particularly anything about it at that stage apart from continue to just talk about it. And, er ... there was already something in Bradford called ... No, what happened was that we started talking about the need for something independent in Bradford, not necessarily a black organisation then, but something to fight the National Front influence in Bradford because they were selling papers and all kinds of things. And we talked about some kind of ad hoc committee to start with, and then I'd to go away, I think. This might have been when I was still at university. I'd to go away to France or something to work as part of my course, and when I came back something had been formed called the 'Ad Hoc Committee against Racism and Fascism'. This had been our idea, started in the Library cafe. So that was already going and, and I'm just wondering how we moved on from that. (Long pause) I'm not sure when or how we particularly moved on from that, but what I *do* know is that in 'seventy-six in Southall there'd been an incident where an Asian youth had been murdered, Gurdit Chagger. And that had a big impact on us and we decided that we'd have to do something now and that we'd have to ... you know, not hang on the coat tails of, you know, the white left any more and organise our own community. And, er ... through organising the meeting, er ... did we organise the meeting? No. Ah, somebody organised the meeting, I've got it now. There's a guy called, a young lad called ... oh, Surinder, and he was a Labour Party member of, or supporter of Militant, or his father was any way, he called a meeting in a pub on Leeds Road, to sort out some kind of youth organisation, which we went along to, and we decided to call another meeting. Anyway this other meeting which happened in the Albion, a group of about eight or ten of us went along, and there was Surinder ... But what happened was the IWA.

I'm sorry, what's IWA?

Er ... The Indian Workers' Association, right? Now there are two Indian Workers' Associations, one under this, this Surinder's father's guidance and one under the others. And when they heard there was a Youth



(Tim Smith/BHRU)

Manningham, Bradford, 1985.

Organisation going to be set up they all turned up to really destroy the idea because they didn't, they saw it as some kind of threat or something done by the other IWA. And it was a very, very odd meeting, because this Surinder, and his sister, they left the meeting in tears because it was so heavy. But these IWA people had already identified us with them as well as they started playing games and things because this person left the meeting, but the meeting, but the meeting still went on. And ... we said 'Okay let's go on a ... let's pass the word round all our people that we weren't going to get involved in this' so they decided to set up a committee, and they tried to nominate us onto it, but we refused and we nominated their people onto it, the oldest we could find, it was the only way to answer them. And then we'd to find a name for this thing, so somebody decided Friendly Youth Association, the Friendly Youth Association, so I said 'We'll all vote for that'. So we all voted for that, so they ended up with a, a committee of old IWA people on this thing called the Friendly Youth Association, without any aims or any objectives, and in a sense they'd been totally outmanoeuvred. And on the Saturday after this meeting they came up to me in town... and said 'Look, we've made a mistake, you know, we can't do anything with this, like, will you take it on'? And ... so we did, but because they still held some kind of control we had to call it the Indian Progressive Youth Association. And that got going and we started taking up the buses' issue and everything else, but a year after that, at the AGM we wanted to change the name to the Asian Youth Movement, so Satnam came up from London, and Tariq came ... I don't know whether he was in Bradford or wherever then, and lots of, you know, young people we'd recruited already came. And we changed the name to The Asian Youth Movement and the IWA went mad you know, they were very, very angry about this because they saw it slipping away now. And they started questioning people's credentials, whether they were members, that sort of thing, but we'd already fixed that up. We'd made sure that everybody were members until we, you know, we got the Asian Youth Movement. We'd got some aims and objectives and everything else passed, and a constitution, until we had the organisation that is now independent of the IWA, The Indian Workers' Association, and everybody, and you know ... accountable only to ourselves.

How did you vary in stance and attitudes and methods, from the IWA?

Well ... er ... in a sense the IWA, The Indian Workers' Association, is a lot more interested in Indian politics, a lot more concerned with those. And secondly we felt that it wasn't militant enough, or didn't .. although its policies might be what it said, but it didn't *do* anything. So we varied in first of all that ... the one thing we were going to do was fight racism ... Two things, one was to let everybody know that we're proud of being Asian because what we felt was that the word Asian would soon become a derogatory term and we wanted to say 'Look we are Asian, we're proud of that'. The second thing we wanted to do was try to oppose racism militantly, and ... you know, if the National Front were there go down and make sure they don't distribute their literature. If there are cases going, if there are deportation cases or whatever going on to fight those as militantly as possible and actually *do* things. Er ... and that's how we really differed, and because we felt they were really, you know, weren't doing anything or ... whatever and we, you know, we had the energy and we had the people and we'd go out and do things rather than just, you know, sit around making resolutions and things. That's ... I think how we differed. As I say this murder in Southall had a big impact on us, and ... The first thing, the very first thing we did was get involved quite accidentally in a deportation case of a worker who'd been arrested in some mill, Brighouse I think, and the police had come in there and thrown him into jail as an illegal immigrant and we sort of organised pickets outside the jail and got him released which was tremendous, you know, we hadn't done anything before you know and suddenly we were involved in this case and we did it. And we had a big demonstration in Bradford from ... and we went round the country and we met other Youth Movements who'd formed, because we weren't the only ones. There was a Southall Youth Movement and the Youth Movement formed in the East End. And there was a lot of black militants in er ... in London, Asian people who'd become radicalised and were doing various things, producing some papers or magazines and things. And there's also another thing going on which was, somebody was trying to set up a Black Socialist's Federation, and they'd coined these badges 'Here to Stay to Fight', which we took on board and became the greatest exponents of, because they disappeared after a few months. And so there were lots of things going on, so we went round the country and talked and things, and you know we did this deportation campaign and we were very, very successful. We had the first, that was the first campaign against somebody to be deported I think, in England. And it was successful and we've been successful ever since. And that became one of the major themes, because it was one of the major problems in Bradford, of the activities of the AYM.