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# The politics of Britain's Asian Youth Movements

ANANDI RAMAMURTHY

*Abstract:* The Asian Youth Movements (AYMs) of the 1970s and 1980s were powerful examples of political movements influenced by black politics and a version of secularism that became a unifying force between different religious communities. Drawing on interviews with participants in the youth movements and material collected together for the 'Tandana-Glowworm' digitised archive of AYM ephemera, the author contextualises the AYM in the political history of Asians in Britain, analyses their distinctive political stance and describes the leaflets, magazines and posters which they produced. The legacy of the AYM, it is argued, lies in their example of organising politically at the grass roots across religious divides.

*Keywords:* AYM, black, Bradford, political organisation, racist violence, secularism, Southall

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*Race & Class*

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Today, British Asians are predominantly defined, both by themselves and by the state, in terms of their religion. Furthermore, it has become difficult to talk about secularism, which is now usually discussed as an idea that belongs entirely to western culture and behaviour and its Christian past. The term is often now interpreted as an attack on Islam and the Muslim organisations in the UK that are struggling to give voice to their community. This has not always been the case and, for many Asians, religion is an identity that has been imposed on them and with which they do not necessarily identify. Just one generation ago, the Asian Youth Movements (AYMs) of the 1970s and 1980s were powerful examples of political movements that were influenced by black politics and a version of secularism that became a unifying force between different religious communities.<sup>1</sup> For the AYM, the term 'black' denoted a political allegiance between those of African and Asian origin, without denying the specific cultural differences of each group, and the term 'secular' implied a unity-in-diversity between those of different religious backgrounds, without suppressing their particular religious identities.

For over a decade, from 1976, young Asians in many English towns and cities forged an anti-racist politics based around local AYM to tackle racial violence, police injustice, immigration controls and other forms of institutional racism. The AYM adopted a new militancy and self-reliance and their politics resonated with Black Power and Third World liberation movements. Though the AYM, by their very emphasis on youth, were publicly breaking with the politics of their elders, they would never have been formed without being able to build on the struggles of earlier generations of Asian political activists.

### **The parents**

Even before the mass migrations of the 1950s and 1960s, when Indians, Pakistanis and Kashmiris were encouraged by Britain to come to work in factories and in mills, there had been a history of left-wing political organisation and involvement by Asians in Britain.<sup>2</sup> The Asian MP Saklatvala was an Indian trade unionist who won the Battersea seat as a Communist Party candidate in 1925, while the renowned Communist Party writer Rajani Palme Dutt lived in London.<sup>3</sup> Indians in Britain also organised as workers: as early as 1938, Indian pedlars in the Midlands formed an Indian Workers' Association (IWA) and similar organisations were later set up in other towns. The IWAs organised locally amongst migrant workers to raise support and funds for the Indian independence struggle.<sup>4</sup> Following independence, the IWAs disintegrated but were re-formed in the 1950s to provide support for the growing body of Indians who were migrating to work in British factories. These Indian Workers' Associations had links with the Indian

Left and Indian trade unions and were therefore established with strong organisational experience and a concern with the class-based nature of society. Numerous IWAs were set up, particularly in the Midlands and there was an especially strong branch in Southall, west London. The associations reflected the differences between left-wing parties in India, although all groups worked to provide social welfare services for new migrants, improve living conditions and deal with the problems all migrants faced, including racism. As the IWA (GB) constitution stated, it aimed to ‘fight against all forms of discrimination . . . promote the cause of friendship, peace and freedom . . . [and] keep its members . . . and the people of Great Britain . . . informed of political, economic and social developments in India’.<sup>5</sup>

As organisations that were influenced by the Indian Communist parties, the IWAs were keen to make links with the British trade union movement and the British Left. At the same time, they were also forced to confront racism in the trade unions and their lack of support for strikes by black workers on issues such as union recognition, equal pay for equal work and racism in the workplace. During the mid-1960s, the IWAs organised striking workers at Woolfs in Southall and Courtauld’s Red Scar Mill in Preston. They also showed solidarity with and were inspired by anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles. At the peak of their power in the 1960s and 1970s, the IWAs had memberships running into the thousands.

In 1964, Pakistanis also formed a Pakistani Workers’ Association (PWA) and, later, there was a Bangladeshi Workers’ Association and a Kashmiri Workers’ Association. On many occasions, these associations worked together to confront the racism of the immigration laws, the racism of British culture, the racism of the shop floor and the racism of the trade unions. As Mushtaq Hussain, a founding member of the PWA, recalls, his first picket was organised alongside IWA members in Birmingham in protest at the showing of the film ‘Nine Little Niggers’ at a city-centre cinema.<sup>6</sup> The workers’ associations were not sectarian organisations, though this is not to say that the often feudal culture of the subcontinent and the entrenchment of the caste system did not impact on them. However, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs worked together. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, this tradition of anti-imperialist and anti-racist unity was to influence the Asian Youth Movements, whose members had already known their parents, uncles and aunts work together across religious and ethnic divides.

In the first wave of post-war migration, it was mainly men who came to work and send money home to their families. The early memberships of the IWAs and PWAs were therefore predominantly male. As migrants began to establish themselves in Britain, many brought their families over. In the late 1960s and 1970s, East African Asians also migrated, out of political necessity, bringing their families with them. The estab-

ishment of families brought new and different issues to the fore for Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants. Racism in schools, unacceptable housing conditions and the forced separation of husbands from wives and children from parents, through the increasingly stringent immigration policies enacted in 1962, 1965, 1968 and 1971, became pressing concerns.<sup>7</sup> The workers' associations mobilised their members in demonstrations against the racism of the immigration laws, in organising pickets against the policy of 'bussing' Asian schoolchildren to schools in other areas and the policy of sending nearly all Asian children to 'English as a second language' (ESL) classes.

### **The children**

By the late 1970s, the children of the first generation of immigrants, who had not necessarily been born in the UK, but had spent the formative years of their life in Britain, were growing up. While their desires and hopes for the future were focused on Britain, these children were confronted with a racist education system, divided families, police harassment and poor housing. They watched their parents being paid less than white workers, often for doing the same jobs at unsocial hours. But even such poorly waged work was not necessarily open to them. The recession of the 1970s had led to factory closures in all of the industrial regions of Britain where, because of the prospects of work, the majority of Asians had earlier settled. With recession, came the need for a scapegoat and Africans, Caribbeans and Asians all became targeted as scroungers, supposedly sponging off an overstretched National Health Service and social security system. Recession and scapegoating led to rising fascist and racist activity with increased attacks on black people on the streets. As Tuku Mukherjee, a one-time ESL teacher, recalls:

As an 'immigrant teacher' I cannot honestly remember a day free from polite confrontation with the liberal racism of my colleagues . . . But nor can I remember a day when I didn't have to accompany the children to the bus stop to protect them against the constant threat of physical attacks.<sup>8</sup>

Indian and Pakistani organisations had been campaigning against racist violence for some years, often alongside African-Caribbean organisations. For example, in 1971, the Pakistani Progressive Party had worked with the Universal Coloured Peoples' Association to organise a demonstration outside the House of Commons against Peter Shore MP, who had refused to address the complaints of assault, robbery and, finally, the murder of Pakistanis in his east London constituency in 1969 and 1970.<sup>9</sup>

During the 1970s, the media also played their part in fuelling racism. A racist backlash was encouraged by highlighting individual cases of black families being supported by the social security system. What before had been a trickle burst into a flood of newspaper articles after 4 May 1976, when the *Sun* broke a story entitled, 'Scandal of £600 a week immigrants'. The rest of the media followed with headlines such as 'More on the Way', 'Asian Flood' and 'Asian Invasion' to publicise the arrival of Asians who had been expelled from Malawi in 1976. In the East End of London, two Bangladeshis were murdered, the first on 7 May, the second on 12 May. Both were stabbed, neither was robbed: the motive was clearly racism.<sup>10</sup>

Then, on 4 June 1976, a month after the *Sun* article, Gurdip Singh Chaggar was killed by racists outside the Dominion theatre, a symbol of self-help and self-organisation in the centre of Southall. Robert Mark, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, declared that the motive was not necessarily racism. The outrage of the community was voiced at a meeting organised by the Indian Workers' Association in Southall on the following Sunday. Community leaders and elders passed a motion blaming the extremist National Front (NF), politicians and the media for the present crisis. Young Asians, however, who were facing racism and harassment on the streets by both fascists and the police every day, wanted direct action.<sup>11</sup> But IWA (Southall) was an organisation with an integrationist approach to politics; it was keen to work with and through British social and political organisations and wanted negotiation as opposed to open revolt.<sup>12</sup> It was, therefore, unable to meet the demands of Southall's young people, who chose instead to march to the police station to demand protection from racist violence, declaring, 'We shall fight like lions'. With the police station surrounded, a sit-in was staged and the protestors refused to leave until two Asian men arrested during the commotion had been released. They won their demand and held another meeting later in the evening to organise defence units. With this demonstration and show of force, the Southall Youth Movement (SYM) was born.<sup>13</sup>

The stance of the SYM, its determination to take direct action and to organise in self-defence, was a major challenge to the method of organising which former Asian organisations had undertaken. The SYM tackled head-on what young Asians perceived as two central issues: popular racism and police racism. In wishing to organise around these issues, young Asians saw the importance of building wider alliances. Although Southall's ethnic minority population was predominantly Sikh Indian at that time, the SYM chose not to organise on cultural or religious lines and deliberately called itself the *Southall* Youth Movement to include both Asian and African-Caribbean youth. As Balraj Purewal, a founding member of the SYM, 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.’<sup>14</sup>

### **The movement spreads**

The determined and angry march of these young men in Southall in 1976 was broadcast across Britain by the news media and proved an inspiration to young people, especially Asians. In Bradford, the Indian Progressive Youth Association was formed in 1977 and, although it was open to all Asians, the conflicts over whether it was Indian or subcontinental led the organisation to dissolve a year later to form the Bradford Asian Youth Movement. In defining itself as Asian, there was a conscious decision to find an identity that would serve to unify rather than divide. In Britain, racism had forced these young people to see themselves as not simply Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi but as Asian and, politically, black. This second generation was not tied by the bonds of subcontinental politics and the divisions within it, since its members were firmly rooted in Britain. But the IWA’s historical style of organisation, which crossed religious lines and emphasised class politics, did still influence young Asians, who chose to broaden their identity further to include young progressives from all countries of the subcontinent and, in some contexts, the movements consciously united all black young people.

The formation of the Asian Youth Movement in Bradford was also an expression of the failure of ‘white’ Left organisations in Britain to effectively address the issues that affected Asian communities. Among the founding members of the Bradford Asian Youth Movement were young Asians who had left the International Socialists (IS, forerunner of the Socialist Workers’ Party), Militant and the Revolutionary Communist Group. In the face of what they believed to be the immediate needs of their community, the political differences between those emerging from different left-wing organisations were buried in order to form an organisation that could voice the grievances and concerns of young Asians.<sup>15</sup> As Tariq Mehmood, a member of Bradford AYM, 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 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 our own house in order and unite as equals.'<sup>16</sup>

Other cities also organised in response to increasing racist attacks. Eventually Asian Youth Movements sprang up in east London, Luton, Nottingham, Leicester, Manchester, Sheffield and Birmingham. There were even small movements in Burnley and Pendle, Luton and Watford.

In common with many other movements, the aims and objectives of the AYM were not formulated at the beginning but emerged through social unrest and developed slowly as the organisations became active and formalised themselves.<sup>17</sup> The AYM never consolidated themselves into a national body but worked in similar ways and with similar concerns in individual towns and cities. The relationships between some local groups, such as between Manchester and Bradford, were extremely strong and the organisations often liaised with each other over specific campaigns.

As one of the earliest AYM with experience of political organisation, gained through the previous involvement in Left organisations of some of its members, the Bradford AYM sought to encourage others to organise. Bradford, for example, sent delegates to London in 1978 to consolidate and support the organisation of Bangladeshi youth after the racist murder of Altab Ali in east London. The Bangladeshi Youth Movement (BYM) that had emerged there adopted a specifically nationalist identification that was a reflection of pride in the newly won independence of Bangladesh in 1971. None of these organisations were exclusive or anti-white; all worked with white anti-racists.<sup>18</sup> The BYM, for instance, worked closely with the Action Committee Against Racial Attacks, Hackney and Tower Hamlets Defence Committee and the Anti-Nazi League in organising a huge demonstration and public meetings to show the solidarity, strength and determination of black communities to defend themselves after the death of Altab Ali.

### **Black as a political colour**

Although those involved in youth movements were Asian, they simultaneously saw themselves as blacks in a white society. They felt united



with Africans and African-Caribbeans through the experience of racism and wished to express this outwardly. They did not see black simply as a skin colour but as a political position; this was a standpoint reflected nationally across all the Asian Youth Movements. 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 immigration laws. For AYM members, a black political identity did not exclude other identities, such as being Punjabi, Bengali, etc. As Anwar Qadir, a member of Bradford AYM, put it: '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.'

The youth movements also drew on the legacy of black political movements in other countries. The use of a black fist as an AYM logo showed an identification with the US Black Power movement, which had, in turn, borrowed from anti-colonial and anti-fascist struggles – *United Africa*, a paper produced by the Organisation of African Unity in the early 1960s, used a similar logo, as did pro-republican literature during the Spanish Civil war.<sup>19</sup> A leaflet produced by the Newham Youth Movement after the death of Akhtar Ali Beg showed the influence of the anti-apartheid struggle, in its adoption of a slogan used by the children of Soweto: 'Don't mourn, organise'.<sup>20</sup> Bhopinder Bassi of Birmingham AYM recalls the influence of both Black Power and the black consciousness movement:

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.<sup>21</sup>

But the concept of blackness with which the AYMs identified was based on a specifically British experience. In the US, black was interpreted to mean 'of African origin' while, in the subcontinent, no one would have defined themselves as black or, for that matter, as Asian. In Britain, blackness was principally thought of as a way of uniting against racism, in the belief that: 'It is up to the black community as a whole to stand up and take the lead in the struggle against racism.'<sup>22</sup> The use of the term 'black' recognised the imperative of the struggle against racism in order to ensure access to basic rights in Britain. It was a term which recognised that colour in the 1970s and 1980s was a crucial part of the experience of racism in Britain and that the racism experienced by Asians was linked to that of other black communities whose peoples were colonised by Britain.

This position had been articulated by A. Sivanandan at the Institute of Race Relations since the late 1960s. A Birmingham AYM member recalled the influence of Sivanandan when discussing the organisation's ideological position:

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.<sup>23</sup>

To adopt a black political identity was to recognise that it was no longer acceptable to fear or tolerate racist attitudes, whether expressed through Rastafarians being turned away from school because of their locks or Sikhs being refused work in bakeries because of their turbans.<sup>24</sup> The right to live in Britain in peace and without victimisation was the primary concern, as indicated by the slogans, often repeated in magazines and leaflets, 'Come what may, we are here to stay' and 'Here to stay, here to fight'.

This black identity was also resolutely secular and non-sectarian. The version of secularism that the AYMs adopted involved a unity-in-diversity, in which different religious identities were not marginalised but given parity of status within a unifying framework, so that Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, Jains and others could all work together. As Anwar Qadir from Bradford recalls:

I grew up with my father talking to me about his youthful days, about how Diwali or Basent or the Eids were celebrated together in the community with genuine love for each other and my schooling was in such a 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 ourselves back together by going to the immigration demos and mobilising the whole community to attend these events.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Balraj Purewal, of Southall Youth Movement, recalls:

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.<sup>26</sup>

This unity-in-diversity also implied a struggle for the rights of religious observances to be recognised, such as the provision of halal meat in

schools, which Bradford AYM was involved in campaigning for in 1984. It also meant that members of the AYM united to defend temples, mosques and gurdwaras.

### Culture and progress

What a black political identity also provided was a framework within which young Asians could explore the increasing cultural hybridity of their lives and search out the progressive aspects of the cultures of the subcontinent and elsewhere. In struggling against racism and colonialism, 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 sub-continent and perceived their cultures and histories to be dynamic. They wished to promote and celebrate the progressive history and culture of their own communities and those of others. As Anwar Qadir of Bradford AYM recalls:

We had education programmes that looked at where we came from in the last 3,000 years, what happened in India over these periods. It was important to know where we were coming from before we started to challenge others.<sup>27</sup>

The AYM were proud of their cultures, adopting the use of the *dhol* (drum) on demonstrations, for example. The AYM produced leaflets in both English and in their own languages and adopted slogans and songs in Urdu and Punjabi that were used by workers in the sub-continent. The Punjabi slogan, 'Police tey nah ithbar karo, apni raki aap karo' (Don't rely on the police, defend yourself) was repeatedly used on demonstrations in Britain in support of self-defence. Young Asians also listened to the songs and experiences of their elders, as described by Qadir:

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 Indian liberation movement. The Indian Workers' Association, along with the Kashmiri workers and the Pakistani Workers' Association, all came . . . together in this struggle; . . . it could be seen as a celebration, once again, of the unity.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, in a calendar produced by Birmingham AYM in 1986, a photograph of the AYM campaign for self-defence was juxtaposed with a photograph of Udham Singh, the Indian freedom fighter who shot and killed Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant General of Punjab at the time of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, in which 379 people were shot by British troops (see fig. 1). Singh, who adopted the name



were articles on the resistance to attacks in Southall and on the death of Blair Peach, the white teacher who had been killed in 1979 at the hands of the police on a march organised by anti-fascists, including the SYM.<sup>29</sup> An injured but determined SYM member speaking at a rally was depicted at the top of the page to represent the youth's resistance and determination to struggle for justice (see fig. 2). Below, the murdered Blair Peach lay in his coffin. On the facing page, the lines of unidentifiable policemen and horses served to illustrate the clinical force of the state. The arrangement of the images implied the culpability of not just the individual police officer but the police force as a whole. This article indicated the national links between youth organisations around the country.

Through coverage of campaigns against deportation and for the right of divided families to be united, the impact of state racism on a personal level was brought out. *Kala Tara* highlighted the first campaigns of the Bradford AYM against the deportation of Saeed Rahmon, a trade unionist. It also covered the victory of Abdul Azad in his struggle against deportation and exposed the inhumanity with which the state sought to prevent Anwar Ditta from bringing her three young children to this country to live with her. Through focusing on the human tragedy of individual campaigns, the paper revealed the

## SOUTHALL ON TRIAL

On Monday April 23rd five thousand policemen came into Southall and locally attacked its black community. Over a thousand people were injured, more than 700 arrested and 362 people from our community are facing criminal charges. Blair Peach was killed and his murderer has still not been identified.

**SURESH**

This programme has been made by the British Overseas Community to show an account of what happened on the day and what the programme does mean to the people of Southall where 80% of the population are from India and from the Indian sub-continent. The programme is a plea for justice and for the Indian people to stand together against the British state's racist and imperialist policies. It is a plea for the Indian people to stand together against the British state's racist and imperialist policies. It is a plea for the Indian people to stand together against the British state's racist and imperialist policies.

**PARITA**


The police had one main aim - to get into the very heart of Southall. They had an air of invincibility about them. It was the first time that the black community in Southall had been so completely surrounded by the police. The police had one main aim - to get into the very heart of Southall. They had an air of invincibility about them. It was the first time that the black community in Southall had been so completely surrounded by the police.

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Blair Peach, Southall AYM.


This is an entire transcript of the OPEN DOOR programme 'Southall on Trial' sent to us by the Southall Defence Committee. A video of 'Southall on Trial' can be obtained from the Asian Youth Movement.

The video film is available from Bradford Asian Youth Movement - 26 Lamb Lane.



Saeed Rahmon, Bradford AYM.

The video film is available from Bradford Asian Youth Movement - 26 Lamb Lane.



Blair Peach - murdered by the state.

Figure 2

Reprinted by kind permission of members of Bradford Asian Youth Movement

racism shared by both the Labour and the Tory parties in their implementation of increasingly strict immigration laws – summarised by the slogan, ‘Labour, Tory, both the same; both play the racist game’. This approach, of adopting cases and turning them into issues and, then, through these issues creating a movement, was the main way in which movements organised.<sup>30</sup>

In the aims and objectives listed in *Kala Tara*, the Bradford AYM also emphasised its belief in workers’ struggles, stating 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’; at the same time, it noted the importance of recognising the racism of these workers’ organisations. In this, the AYM followed in the footsteps of the PWAs and IWAs, which had organised repeatedly against the racism of the trade unions.

The literature produced by other AYM’s indicated similar sets of political concerns and allegiances. Manchester AYM’s magazine *Liberation*, produced in April 1981, indicated support for a wide variety of black struggles. The magazine featured discussions of immigration laws and police racism including coverage of the ‘New Cross massacre’, in which thirteen African-Caribbean teenagers were killed in a fire at a party. (At the time it was believed this had been caused by a petrol bomb.) Again, the issue of bringing African-Caribbean and Asian people together in the struggle against racism was paramount. The slogan ‘Here to stay, here to fight’ was emblazoned on the cover of the magazine, identifying it with the successful AYM campaign to bring Anwar Ditta’s children to Britain.

In Sheffield, an AYM was established around the campaign to defend Ahmed Khan, who was arrested after defending the restaurant where he worked from a racist attack. Like Bradford and Manchester before it, Sheffield AYM also produced a magazine to outline its aims and raise awareness of other campaigns. *Kala Mazdoor* (Black Worker), published in 1983, again indicated in its title the sense that young Asians were blacks in a white society, as well as the importance of identification with and support for workers’ struggles. Like the groups in other cities, they saw the importance of organised resistance, writing: ‘Spontaneous struggle is not enough; an organised response to racism is essential to our future life in this country.’<sup>31</sup> Articles on the Newham 8 campaign, the case of eight youths 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, again pointed to a unity between black struggles across ethnic divides. ‘One struggle, one fight’, was the slogan that was used repeatedly in leaflets and in *Kala Mazdoor* itself.

All the AYM magazines that were produced also expressed an anti-imperialist and internationalist perspective, linking the fight against

racism in Britain to liberation struggles worldwide. *Kala Tara* highlighted the North of England Irish Prisoners' Committee, to which the AYM had sent two delegates. *Liberation* contained articles on Palestine and Sheffield's *Kala Mazdoor* and *Kala Shoor* (Black Noise), which was subtitled 'Black consciousness', covered issues relating to anti-apartheid, the impact of Zia's Islamicisation policies on women in Pakistan, the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India, and poems about Palestine.

### Gender and the AYMs

While all the AYMs theoretically supported women's struggles and the liberation of women, Manchester AYM was distinctive in its conscious effort to support women's struggles and Asian women's rights. Along with photographs of Asian women on demonstrations, a section of *Liberation* articulated Manchester AYM's 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.<sup>32</sup>

Manchester AYM set up a women's section and adopted a symbol that was used on their membership forms, in which two Asian women join an Asian man in shouting through the bars of a prison window (see fig. 3). This image was first created by the Mukhti collective in London in the late 1970s. The magazine produced by Mukhti expressed a similar anti-imperialist and anti-racist perspective to that which the AYMs were to adopt. But, unlike the AYMs, Mukhti was an organisation without a strong community base.

Although Manchester AYM attempted to address gender issues directly, other AYMs only addressed these questions theoretically or by making links with groups such as the wages for housework campaign. The majority of the membership of the AYMs remained male and distinctly masculine in their organisational culture. As such, members of Birmingham Black Sisters (BBS) dubbed the Birmingham Asian Youth Movement 'the Asian Young Men's Association'.<sup>33</sup> Members of BBS recognised that the AYM did not enable women to participate equally, since meetings were often held in pubs and clubs that many women did not wish to visit. Similarly, Harwant Bains has commented on the 'machismo' of the Southall Youth Movement and its patriarchal attitudes towards women, which he describes as similar to those found amongst male elders of the community.<sup>34</sup> It is clear that the black



Figure 3

*Reprinted by kind permission of members of Manchester Asian Youth Movement*

identity that many of the youth movements embraced was, in many senses, uncompromisingly male. There are also visual indicators of this in some of the images repeatedly used in AYM literature, such as the image of an 'angry young man' with a raised fist, which appeared first in *Kala Tara*, then on an early bulletin of the Bradford 12 campaign (see following section) and, later, in leaflets produced by Sheffield AYM in support of the miners' strike in 1985 (see fig. 4).

However, the AYMs did try to support campaigns that BBS and Southall Black Sisters, for example, helped to organise in support of women such as Balwant Kaur, who was murdered as a result of domestic violence, and Iqbal Begum, who was jailed for killing her husband after suffering years of domestic violence. There was, however, a class issue involved in how Birmingham AYM and BBS interacted. Many, although not all, of the members of Birmingham AYM were working class, whereas the women in BBS were mostly middle class. This had an impact on how the groups wanted to organise, as Sheera Johal of Birmingham AYM recalls:

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.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Bradford 12**

In the summer of 1981, rumours began to circulate that fascists were planning to attack Bradford's Asian communities on 11 July. Members





Figure 4

*Reprinted by kind permission of members of Bradford Asian Youth Movement and Mukhtar Dar, member of Sheffield Asian Youth Movement*

of the United Black Youth League (UBYL), an organisation which had recently been formed in Bradford after a split in the Bradford AYM over the issue of state funding, decided to organise the defence of the community. After a crate of home-made petrol bombs was found on some wasteground, twelve members of the UBYL (including Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Hindus) were charged with conspiracy to cause an explosion and endanger lives. Their trial and the campaign in support of the 12, which black communities and anti-racists mounted, was to have a significant impact on the political organisation of young Asians throughout the country and, in asserting the right of a community to self-defence, the trial itself was to make legal history. For many, the trial was seen as a political battleground between, on the one hand, the police and the state and, on the other, the right of black political organisations to organise collective self-defence and direct action. AYM members talk passionately about the defence of the Bradford 12. Jani Rashid, a Bradford AYM member, reflects:

In terms of the original incident, while in many towns and cities there were major disturbances that evening, in Bradford it was a non-event – although I always wondered how the police knew about it all and where the bombs were stashed. In terms of the campaign, the whole response was fantastic. The first meeting in the Arcadian was packed with supporters from many different organisations.<sup>36</sup>

Another member, Anwar Qadir, commented:

I went through many different emotions during this period as one of the people that was lifted in the raids . . . I spent three days in police custody in my underwear, deprived of sleep, being questioned at all hours . . . I was very bitter at what was happening to us . . . It was AYM that raised the issue in the community. We could not sit back and let this happen to our boys.<sup>37</sup>

The mobilisation for the Bradford 12 defendants generated a huge quantity of campaign material in all the major cities where AYM members were present and attracted broad support generally. This support was not limited to the Asian community but was spread widely across black communities and among white anti-racists. A UBYL statement at the beginning of the case urged support for the Bradford 12 precisely because of the support they had given to 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.<sup>38</sup>

The twelve defendants, in defining themselves politically as black and acting in solidarity with all those struggling against racism and oppression, won mass public support. As the civil rights solicitor Ruth Bundy has recently reflected, in contrast to the way that the young men caught up in the Bradford riots of 2001 were regarded, in 1981 it was 'the sons of the community that were on trial'.<sup>39</sup> The Bradford 12 campaign motivated individuals who had not formerly been involved in politics to organise in support of the defendants. One man, who would later become a key organiser within Sheffield AYM, recalled how moved he had been on seeing a poster in which fists were entwined in barbed wire with the slogan, 'Until all are free, we are all imprisoned'.<sup>40</sup> This image and slogan must have had a depth of meaning for many. Prior to the trial, the magazines *Kala Tara* and *Liberation* had depicted the fist as proud and independent; by 1981, the fist was imprisoned, as were some of the men who had encouraged others to join in resistance. In a Bradford 12 poster, the raised fist appeared again, not singular and iconic but together with other raised fists in a symbol of collective defiance against the state's oppres-

sion. There was ‘no conspiracy but police conspiracy’, as one of the slogans of the defence campaign asserted.

The Bradford 12 campaign, although, by necessity, much broader than the Asian Youth Movements, expressed support for the ideals and positions of the AYMs. Apart from the adoption of the Black Power fist, other images from *Kala Tara* were also recycled in the Bradford 12 campaign bulletins. The photograph of the angry young man on Brick Lane, mentioned earlier, was re-worked on an image for one of the Bradford 12 campaign bulletins to symbolise the campaign and their determination to secure the release of the men.<sup>41</sup> An image from a Mexican resistance poster was adopted for a poster entitled ‘Gagged’, illustrating the restrictions imposed on the twelve defendants, who were not allowed to attend or take part in any political meetings.<sup>42</sup> The poster depicted a black face with its mouth in chains. The eventual acquittal of the Bradford 12 by the jury established the right of self-defence, not only applied to the defence of one’s own person but also the right of a community to defend itself. This identification with the community, the affirmation of a collective identity that was so fundamental to the successful outcome of the trial, was a reflection of the AYM’s core beliefs. 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.’<sup>43</sup>

### **Dilemmas of decline**

Why did these organisations and the ideas they represented lose political influence so rapidly during the 1980s? Firstly, it is important to note that key members of the AYMs and the UBYL, in developing their political perspectives and attitudes as they grew up, began to change their central political commitments. For some members, a developing anti-imperialist perspective posed a contradiction to organisations that campaigned predominantly on anti-racist issues and they chose to join or establish organisations in which their concern with their ‘home’ countries could be more clearly developed. Other members defected from grassroots black organising and joined the Labour Party. The interest in and commitment to tackling police racism and harassment did, however, continue and AYMs worked with the new ‘monitoring groups’ to mobilise nationally on this issue. Southall Monitoring Group and Newham Monitoring Project (NMP) had been established in 1979 and 1980 following mass campaigns against racist murders and attacks and the police’s lack of commitment to tackling these issues. From 1982–85, NMP worked with AYMs in the North and the Midlands to mobilise and build national profiles for the

Newham 8 and Newham 7 campaigns for the right to self-defence against racist attacks.

Yet the 1980s also saw growing attacks on the black political unity forged in the mid-1970s and independent black organisations came under increasing scrutiny by the state. Following the disturbances in 1981, Lord Scarman's report advocated the need to fund 'ethnically disadvantaged' communities – leading to a scramble for state handouts and, ultimately, to the co-option of youth leaders.<sup>44</sup> This impacted on the development of independent organisations. The Newham Youth Movement, for example, appears to have disintegrated or lost impact fairly rapidly. In commenting on the effect of central and local government funding for community groups, Harwant Bains noted how a group of professional 'ethnics' emerged in the 1980s, the 'career militants', whose 'vociferous claim to represent the militant demands of their community . . . secures them state patronage'.<sup>45</sup>

The AYMs themselves began to seek outside funding, in order to set up community centres in Bradford and Manchester, which brought with it potential dangers. Nilofer Shaikh, a member from Manchester, recalls the new priorities that prompted her to leave the group after funding had been obtained for an AYM-backed youth centre:

The group's time was taken up by organising activities to fulfil the criteria of the funding e.g. outings, youth centre sessions, playing pool, table tennis and the management of the project itself.<sup>46</sup>

Others from Bradford recall how 'it was not a group with teeth anymore'<sup>47</sup> and they 'did not want to get used in the drive towards providing fodder for the Labour Party',<sup>48</sup> which they had previously opposed vociferously. One former Bradford AYM member, Marsha Singh, went on to become a Labour MP. With funding, came also the divisiveness and competitiveness between organisations and communities bidding to secure resources. Reflecting on the demise of the AYMs, Bhopinder Bassi 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.'<sup>49</sup> Tuku Mukherjee commented that: 'The National Association of Asian Youth and the CRC were prime examples of the apparatus created by the state, to house a class of political middle-men and to sabotage the aspirations of youth by activating the policy of "divide and rule".'<sup>50</sup>

Through funding criteria, the state split the communities into Asian and black and the broad-based concept of a political black identity that had been embraced by the youth movements struggled to maintain influence.<sup>51</sup> Within the context of state funding, an identity based on black resistance gave way to new identities focused on the cultural domain. The politics of the youth movements was diminished by the

concentration on what became known as the three 'S's: 'saris, samosas and steel bands'. In negotiating a share of the limited resources available, groups were continually identifying and arguing for their group or community's difference and distinctiveness. By the late 1980s, a whole new bout of academic theorising had emerged around 'the politics of difference'. The consequence, as academic Kobena Mercer argued, was 'that one group's loss was another group's gain. In this zero sum game the only tangible consequence of diversity was dividedness'.<sup>52</sup> Whilst the first divisions were between Asian and black, as time went on, the splits and divisions increased along cultural, religious and ethnic divides. As Mukhtar Dar, an artist who worked with Sheffield AYM, reflected: 'What is significant is the process by which the AYM's 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.'<sup>53</sup>

Although AYM's in Sheffield, Birmingham and Bradford continued to be active, organise in defence of their communities and respond to the challenges faced during the 1980s, such as the Handsworth riots of 1985, the influence of the youth movements and the broad-based black political identity that they had embraced began to lose influence. In the mid-1980s, the Bradford AYM organised actively against racism in the education system, campaigning against the anti-multiculturalist views of head teacher Ray Honeyford. Bradford AYM defended the idea of secular education in a policy paper on religious schools while also advocating anti-racist education in its document *Reading, Riting, Rithmetic, Race*.<sup>54</sup> But, 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. By 1989, the Rushdie affair was to drive activity along explicitly religious lines.

For most AYM members, there was little contradiction between a black political identity and cultural and religious affiliations, such as Kashmiri or Sikh. Yet within a few years, the global situation had shifted with the rise of an Anglo-American Christian fundamentalism and its support for Zionism, the rise of Hindutva in India and the rise of Islamist organisations – partly fostered by American funding of Islamist groups during the Cold War. Muslims became the new scapegoat. By the 1990s, this had impacted on the way in which some ex-AYM members defined themselves. As Matloob Hussain, a former member of Sheffield AYM, commented:

At the time [of my involvement in the AYM] 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.<sup>55</sup>

### Legacy of the AYM

The AYM's remain a powerful example of independent self-help organisations and of a movement that mobilised at the grass roots. The black political identity of resistance adopted by the AYM's enabled not only a unity between those of African and Asian origin but also between those of different religious and national backgrounds within the Asian community. Whereas, today, Muslims are left largely isolated from other communities, in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when racism was defined firmly along lines of colour, as opposed to religious identity, communities organised across religious divides. The issue of colour is still a factor in both institutional and other forms of racism but the changing global situation and the state-sponsored fragmentation of identities along more communal lines has made it harder for a black political identity to have currency today. In addition, the nature of racism has changed. Then, 'Pakis' were blacks, now they are Muslims. Increasing Islamophobia has led Muslim youths to engage in political debate and young Muslims are, for the most part, the most politically conscious group of young people today. At the same time, the absence of a broad-based political unity between oppressed groups has led to large numbers of Hindus, Sikhs and others trying to distance themselves from Muslims. But it is not just Muslims who have watched the tube carriages empty around them and been subject to physical and verbal abuse in the current 'war on terror'.

What the AYM's showed most powerfully was the need for people to organise against their own oppression and that there is no substitute for self-help and self-organisation. Most importantly, their experience of organising across religious lines and their broad-based black identity demonstrated that solidarity between communities suffering racism and oppression is always in the interests of the oppressed.

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