

JOE HAGARTEY

Can you begin by telling me briefly about what you were doing in the 60s and 70s?

The reason I became a councillor was because I was always involved in politics. I became an active member of the Labour Party. I joined in 1970 and I stood in Baker Street ward in 1971. That was a safe Tory ward so I didn't get in. I then became chair of the local Marylebone Labour Party. I was selected to be a candidate in the Church Street ward in 1974. I managed to remain a councillor right up to 1990 when I stood down. I was a councillor for 16 years and that covered the major period of people of Bangladeshi heritage coming into the area.

Do you remember when you first started having contact with Bengalis?

I think it was probably the late 70s. When I first came, Lisson Green Housing Estate was being opened. My father used to work where Lisson Green is now. My father used to work on the rail and there used to be a depot there. Lisson Green, the housing estate, was being built during the 70s and it was unusual in that it was partially GLC funded and GLC nominations were made - not only were people rehoused locally but people from lots of different parts of London. We got a rather a mixed community then which included a lot of Afro-Caribbean people who have largely moved out since but a range of people from different origins. This area had a lot of Irish people in it, quite a good big Irish community but again they've moved out.

There were Asians who were part of the people who moved in the early to mid 70s but at that time it was not a largely Bengali community, they were a minority. So it was very mixed, they would have been a substantial minority but gradually in the late 70s and early 80s as people moved on and as vacancies arose... and because there was a large Bengali community in East Marylebone for two reasons: because there were a lot of restaurants in that area and a lot of Bangladeshi people came to work in those restaurants; and because the rag trade still existed in those days and a lot of Bangladeshi people worked in that. So they tended to come and live with families in very overcrowded accommodation.

Although the problems in the 70s were still bad, lots of people needed housing, the situation was gradually improving. It is different today because the situation is gradually getting worse. The situation in terms of housing so people did get the opportunities to move. So what happened because we were in Westminster the council rehoused people in areas where they wanted. At that time Lisson Green wasn't very popular because – it dates from when it was created – there was a mix of people from all over it didn't have the local... everywhere else round here would have been people housed from nearby so everybody knew each other whereas there it was more mixed. People on the whole didn't like it, it developed a reputation as a fairly crime-ridden estate - you had these long interconnected balconies which you could

go from house to house around it which were removed some time ago but you could get away easily. It did have a pretty poor reputation so as a result there were vacancies and for people who were coming in desperate for housing it was the most obvious thing. So the Bangladeshi community started first being created in Lisson Green. As time moved on and opportunities moved elsewhere other opportunities in Church Street became housed by Bangladeshi families as well but it was initially very much on Lisson Green.

Do you remember getting to know any of the Bengalis?

We tended to work through Mr Choudhury, the forerunners of the Marylebone Bangladesh Society. Bangladeshi people tended to go to them and they tended to come to us. Mr Choudhury was very good. He worked on London Transport, one of the station. His English was good so that was a factor because a lot of people's English was not very good so they weren't confident about coming to see people like me. And, of course, Murad Qureshi's father used to be around at that time although he didn't live in this area, he lived just next door in Little Venice. He was very prominent in this area so those were people we tended to meet and deal with. Then we found out there were tensions between individuals we didn't want to get involved in. People had different views on things because there was the traditional Bengali view on things where the elders were the people who represented the community and no women... and there were others who were more progressive. I remember a bit later, two women coming along to a surgery, by this stage we had got passed it all being channelled through one person..., and saying to me 'Those old men don't speak for us! Be careful of speaking to them because they're not representative of our view.'

Gradually as people became more confident, we held surgeries and people came to us with their issues and problems. The biggest one I can recall is housing and size of houses because they were large families. It was very difficult to get housing of the appropriate size even in places like Lisson Green which had been built fairly generously by former standards. By various devices like combining properties or allowing families to rent two properties the council were able to help a bit in those circumstances. We used to get invited to a range of things like Eid celebrations with orange juice which was unusual for us used to alcohol. I found myself being introduced to people not from the area because people from relative distinction in the Bengali community all over London would be brought to these things. They were the more articulate, able, entrepreneurial people you met rather than the ordinary average people.

Over time these things change and people get more confident and the children grow up and they speak perfect English. I remember when I used to go round on the doorsteps it would be the children who would interpret. Most of the father were working, in restaurants, hotels, rag trade, London transport, but it was in the 80s when jobs started to dry up that people weren't in work but at first most people were working.

What other issues did the community face?

I'll talk a bit about education. The children went to local schools and on the whole were very well behaved compared to some of the other groups that were there. But for a long time they didn't achieve very highly and obviously that was a bit of a concern. Can't remember which way round it was but either boys or girls, one gender did better than the other to begin with. We were worried about it but now of course both do perfectly well. One of the underlying issues was the way that girls were treated as second class. Now I think that situation has changed a lot.

In your experience, what kind of things did newly arrived Bengalis need support with?

There was an organisation called Community House Information Centre which worked very closely with the community including Bengali families and they were very good at navigating the system and they would bring in people who could translate as well, which was a great help. You talk about navigating the system, it's difficult enough if your perfectly good at English because the system was and is complicated to get this benefit or that benefit. If your English is poor its doubly difficult and they really needed an advocate. There were people who would come to us about benefits and we would take those interviews up with the DHSS as it was then.

How did the needs of Bengali migrants change over the period that you worked with them?

The English became a lot better as almost all families had access to at least someone who could speak English even if the person who needed things didn't. The housing thing changed because you started to get young people beginning to grow up and then needing housing and those problems continue to today. Some people were successful in their restaurant or business or whatever they were doing and managed to buy property outside Westminster and of course some took advantage of right-to-buy within Westminster and used that as a bargaining tool to move out. The world has changed a bit more recently in that where we are now is a popular destination. For a long time people wanted to move away and move out of London. The population of was declining and it did decline right up until 1990. The good side of that was it meant the housing situation was easing, although the Tory government policies of the 80s of selling council housing and not building very many started to bite.

How did the different communities get along in the area?

My impression was that integration was slow. There wasn't huge tensions – that would be to exaggerate things. On the whole the Bangladeshis were a peaceful community and didn't give so many problems. Children tended to get to know each other in school and that was how it tended to happen rather than through real adult integration. Of course over a period the produce in the market started to change, it took a long time actually. One of the things that was

noticeable was that the traders were white and a lot of the customers were from minority communities. The traders were for a long time quite racist in their views and there may even still be elements of that around but its much less because there are traders of all sorts of different backgrounds and all sorts of people go to them and buy all sorts of produce.

Did the racial tensions you mentioned ever spill over?

I don't recall it being major in our area. I don't recall it being a major problem when I was a councillor. I do remember tension and violence earlier between white and black people. I don't remember so much with the Bengali community. The racism wasn't that kind, all the authorities were white people, all the institutions were ruled by white people so it was in the institutional side of things that racism was experienced. People didn't get a fair deal in things like education. It did happen but it took a fair while for things like ESOL classes and eventually home language classes which were introduced in the 80s. Things like that started to happen but it took a while.

How did people deal with language barriers?

As far as I was concerned it was often through mediators, the people who were more articulate within the community. That tended to be it at the beginning but then kids afterwards. It can be inappropriate for kids to translate certain things but not for the things I was doing but obviously for medical conditions that's not so appropriate. Over the years the medical profession began to get translators and translation services even if it was over the telephone.

Are there any Bengalis you know particularly well?

Murad I know very well and before that his father Mushtaq and people like Toki. It was through the Labour party I really got to know people.

What do you think motivated people to move from Bangladesh to London?

I know that the war in Bangladesh and Independence in 1971 saw waves coming for various reasons and the most involved wanted to get away for obvious reasons. But also economic pressures because Sylhet is a tremendously poor area.

Do you remember the kind of families living here?

The difference between Church Street and East Marylebone is you would get single people in East Marylebone because they would come first of all on their own and they would work in the restaurants, rag trade, and so on. When they bought their families they would be housed in Lisson Green, that was the key to getting housing because you wouldn't get housed here as a single male.

How do you think life differed for men and women?

Of course, the men had been here for a while. They had to some extent assimilated and quite a lot of them did speak some English and knew their whereabouts. Whereas the women would not speak English but I do remember there were classes for women to learn English so it became one of the things that did happen.

What do you think it was like for the kids?

The families tended to be together and you tended to have large extended families as well. I think that was a tremendous support to children. I think that made it a bit different from the Afro-Caribbean community having those networks. They helped a lot and were necessary in those days stopping children getting into trouble. Because everybody was from the same area people knew each other back then.

But looking at education, for a long time children underachieved and then began to achieve. It would be really interesting to find out why that was but it may be because people struggled to integrate and understand the education system at that time. Certainly the families have always been aspirational as far as I can tell.

What was Westminster like at the time in the 70s?

London was declining in population, schools were closing, there was lots of debate about which schools to close and things like that. The housing situation was starting to ease but it was never an easy situation. People were moving out of London because they saw it as the thing to do. It was seen as a place of high crime and deprivation, a place to get away from rather than a place to come to. The market has always been there; people will argue about if it is better now or better then.

For a long time, it was a lot of big families, a very close knit community but as time changed and people aspired to the same sort of values as other people and gradually we've seen that happen with people on and moving out. We started to get councillors from the Bengali community and gain new community organisations. There were lots of things which were contributing factors to the area.

Is there anything we haven't touched on?

We haven't talked about health. One of the issues has been in the cooking in ghee and stuff like that which is terribly bad for you. The level of life expectancy has been lower in Church Street than in the rest of Westminster. I remember we did manage to employ a young Bengali woman as a dietician and that really helped. The health outcomes for Bangladeshi people are not anywhere as near as they need to be. One of the things we found in the Bangladeshi

community is the very high respect for elders and that doesn't really convey into the British culture as you may know, therefore older Asian people were not treated how they were used to. They weren't treated any differently to people from a white background but white people probably wouldn't have expected it to the same extent.