

KAREN BUCK

Were you in Westminster in the 70s?

No I grew up in Essex. I moved here to go to university and then came to Westminster just after I finished university.

Do you remember your first contact with the Bengali community in Westminster?

I remember it very well. When I first came to Westminster I was already a member of the Labour party so I was already active. I remember being in Church Street for meetings with the Marylebone Bangladeshi association which I think was then the only community organisation for Bangladeshis in Westminster and it was huge! I used to come here with Mushtaq Qureshi who sadly we've now lost, who was a councillor for a very long time. We used to come for the Bangladeshi Independence Day celebrations and it was brilliant. I remember going into the old North Westminster community school building in Church Street and we used to have 500 people in the room.

Do you remember what Westminster was like back then for Bengalis?

Westminster was less socially divided than it is now. I mean it has always been a place with very very rich areas and much poorer areas. Knightsbridge and Mayfair were always fantastically rich and Church Street and Harrow Road were always poorer. But I think those extremes have got bigger because housing is now so expensive that people in the middle are not here so much. Some of the Bangladeshi community who bought flats, sometimes former council flats but not always, wouldn't be buying here anymore because its too expensive. You've seen people go, some of the people who had a bit more money to make those choices. If it was a choice between a property of half a million and one of 200 thousand, people will go for the cheaper.

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

I would say the things that are most important:

Education. To start with and when I first knew the Bangladeshi community in the early 80s the Bangladeshi community was not doing well educationally. These were new arrivals and their children were new arrivals, often new arrivals who didn't have much education in Bangladesh either. So that was a real battle that had to be fought and I think that's been a remarkable success story. Now we see young Bengali people of the last ten years doing really well educationally and some of the most improved results of any community in Britain which is extraordinary and very good.

Housing is a problem because Bangladeshi community arrivals didn't have money so tended to need council flats. There were never enough council houses. It's worse now than it was then but there was still a lot of overcrowding. That's a problem.

Jobs. It is still true that a British Bangladeshi is going to find it harder to get work or well-paid work than many other minority communities. That is a real problem and is still a problem. The community has come a long way educationally but there is still a problem with housing and still a problem with equal opportunities for well-paid work.

What are the things people have done to deal with those issues?

Well I think education is a success story and education itself will break down some of those barriers. I go to some of the award ceremonies and they're handing out awards for extraordinary results at school and those young people have got prospects now that they didn't have before to go into professions and business and just do very well. The other thing that I think is really good is that we now have Bengali political representation including in Parliament significantly. We still have more to do at but at local authority level we've had a Mayor. I don't agree with the politics but it's still really important that we have political representation within each of the communities and it should be more than one party.

Thinking about the Bengali migrants you knew, what do you think motivated them to come to the UK?

Well I think what we know about new arrival communities is that all of them have a tendency to go to where there is already a small community. So you only need a few people for new arrivals to go to where they are. In the beginning, new arrival communities are quite insecure and they like to have the comfort of being around a community that is like them and also has memories and a past and support for each other. That's not unusual for Bangladeshi communities, it's true for all communities. As the communities get more settled and usually a bit better off then it will become more mixed and people will go to different places. And another this is that new communities go to where housing is cheap and that changes so nothing stays the same. When I first came to Westminster, it had a Bangladeshi community particularly in Church Street but also a very big Irish community and a big Afro-Caribbean community and now the Irish and Afro-Caribbean communities aren't really there anymore. They've moved on as have some of the Bangladeshi community and now we have an Arab community. 20 years on it will be different again so movement and change is always part of the story.

What struggles and obstacles did you remember the Bengali community facing when they first arrived?

I think getting reasonably paid work. What you had for a lot of new arrival Bangladeshi communities... in London its different to Manchester or the Pakistani communities in some of the mill towns where there were particular types of employment. Some of those employers were deliberately going to other countries to recruit workers to come. In central London that was a bit different because you don't have that single industry that you have elsewhere. But obviously the catering industry was a really big deal for the Bangladeshi community and it still is a big deal. So a lot of people came and were working in and around the catering industry. But then a lot of people don't want that for their own children, that's again part of the immigrant story. They will do everything they have to do and they will work until they drop but they will want their children to get on and do something different. I think the communities of the 60s and the 70s and the 80s were working very very hard in particular industries with the restaurant trade being a really big part of that. That has changed - there is still a huge curry and successful industry but a lot of young Bangladeshis don't want to work in the restaurant trade so you have those issues.

How did the different communities get along in the area?

Well I think London has always done pretty well because in London you have such a mix. So here in Westminster we have 100 languages spoken in our schools. We've got 30 Muslim communities, Muslims from dozens of different countries and different practices and traditions. So we are so diverse we are so mixed that it is much easier. Where it can be hard is where you have towns where you have one community and a new arrival community – just the two of you trying to find a way of living together. I don't think cities do too badly.

Is there anything else you wanted to say?

I think the Bangladeshi community has a great deal to be proud of. The Bangladeshi community is an extremely hard working community and I think they've come along in leaps and bounds in terms of educational achievement for their children and I think that's brilliant and it is overwhelmingly it is a successful migration story. But we have to remember that several things are true at the same time and one of the things that is true is there's still quite a lot of disadvantage including housing and employment. The story is never finished.