

# The Asian Youth Movements: racism and resistance

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The history of the AYMs has many useful lessons to offer today

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**F**or many today there is disillusionment and a lack of belief in the possibility of progressive change. But the Asian Youth Movements (AYMs) that emerged thirty years ago provide us with an example of the power of independent organisation and the possibility of fighting injustice and winning: as part of a wider anti-racist movement that changed the face of Britain, they spoke truth to power, gave black people a chance to challenge discrimination in their own voice, and expressed, at their most effective moments, the value of broad-based solidarities.<sup>1</sup> So a reflection on their history can produce useful insights for those struggling against racism today.

The Movements formed from the mid-1970s in Bradford, Sheffield, Manchester, Coventry, Leicester, Birmingham and London, as well as in small towns such as Bolton, Burnley, Luton and Watford, with the aim of defending their communities from racist violence and campaigning against the racism of the immigration laws, as well as the racism of trade unions and employers. Adopting an anti-imperialist analysis of racism, they drew attention to racism as an exercise of power that was intimately linked to the development of capital accumulation across the globe. Inspired by the histories of resistance to racism and slavery in the US as well as the

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anti-colonial struggles in their own communities, and those across Africa and Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, they organised with a recognition of the link between their own struggles and those of peoples resisting colonialism and imperialist expansion across the globe. As such they provide an example of a movement that sought to create solidarities between oppressed groups: they were non-sectarian, and included individuals of all faiths and none.

By the end of the 1980s, however, the broad-based unity within which they had operated had been fractured; the rise of identity politics and shifting geo-political imperatives had encouraged attention to cultural and religious identities, and this had led to increasing sectarianism. Muslims in particular have been blamed for these shifts. They have been scapegoated as a threat to what is framed as a democratic and liberal West - a West in which, in the name of democracy and liberalism, we have seen a continual erosion of civil liberties and human rights. In an attempt to analyse this changing climate there have been critiques of multiculturalism not only from the right, which argues for the importance of integration, but also from the left, where arguments have been put forward in some quarters that multiculturalism has created fragmentation and disintegration, and that British society is 'sleepwalking to segregation'.

In these debates what has been pushed out of the central frame of reference is any understanding of racism as an articulation of power, formulated on the basis of physical characteristics such as colour, or social characteristics such as culture, language or religion. Yet today the consequences of racism are just as acute as in the 1970s and 1980s, if not more so. The death of Muhsin Ahmed in Rotherham in 2015, after he was attacked while walking to the mosque, is evidence of continued street-level racism, while the 12 Asian/Muslim men in Rotherham facing trial for violent disorder following unrest after a Britain First demonstration in the same city highlights the impact of continued police criminalisation of communities who defend themselves. And the fact that citizens have had to campaign to push the government to take in 300 unaccompanied child refugees from the wars in Syria highlights the draconian nature of immigration laws, driven by racism.

Today, however, despite these core issues remaining acute, Asians, Africans and the wider community of anti-racist activists have found it more difficult to build the kind of broad-based solidarities that were forged in the 1970s and 1980s. I would like to explore here what we can learn from looking back in history at the campaigns

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won by the AYMs, at the ways they organised, and the story of their disintegration.

## Background

In the late 1970s, Britain saw the children of post-war migrants reach adulthood. Brought here by their parents and having attended school in Britain, they had dreams and aspirations which were shattered by discrimination in education, housing and the workplace, and through the racism of the immigration laws which divided families across continents. Viewed as 'a problem' by the state, they also faced violence from racists more widely and the police in particular.<sup>2</sup>

Such conditions meant that young South Asians felt they had no choice but to form youth organisations to defend themselves and their communities. Though many members were of college age, the AYMs did not have fixed age restrictions. They included individuals who were as young as fifteen and others who were in their late twenties and had experience of political organisation and the workplace. Their aim was to create organisations to represent the concerns of young South Asians and their families. In this sense they were organisations of youth but not simply *for* youth: they were taking up issues that impacted on their communities as a whole. They included descendants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as members of the South Asian diaspora from Malaysia, Kenya and elsewhere.

Many of the Asian youth movements were formed in response to street violence and racist murders. In Southall for example, the Southall Youth Movement emerged after the murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar in 1976, in protest at police inaction. The members were frustrated with the Indian Workers Association (Southall), which wanted the younger people to wait for an inquiry before making demands, and were determined to defend themselves.<sup>3</sup> In 1978 the death of Altab Ali in Brick Lane led to the development of a number of youth organisations, including the Bangladeshi Youth Movement. In Bradford the formation of the Asian Youth Movement was partly precipitated by a National Front march through Manningham, the area where the Asian community lived, but it was also triggered by the left's response to the event: they had protested but had not taken direct action to stop the NF. For Asian youth the NF had to be stopped from rampaging through their community. Young people believed they needed their own organisations, which put the concerns of the Asian community first. From this position they could then work in solidarity with others.<sup>4</sup>

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From the beginning, the AYMs recognised the importance of challenging both state and street racism, understanding the root cause of racism as not simply hatred and prejudice but as an exercise of power. Many of their campaigns exposed the racism of immigration laws or challenged police harassment and the criminalisation of black people. Adopting a black political identity, the AYMs recognised the importance of unity between all who had experienced oppression through slavery and colonialism. They did not see a conflict between this political identity and their cultural identities. In adopting the term black as a political identity, they were not rejecting their linguistic or cultural origins: they wished, rather, to quote Fanon, to build a culture through anti-imperialist solidarity, one that was not ossified, that was not based on folk lore - 'an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature' - but was revolutionary and expressed 'the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence'.<sup>5</sup> Expressions of unity between Africans and Asians had been formed in the 1960s through a number of anti-imperialist networks, and the black power movements in the US, as well as the black consciousness movement in South Africa, also inspired the AYMs - who used the black fist in their literature. This anti-imperialist black political identity had also been adopted by members of the Indian Workers Association (Birmingham), which had been established by early migrants, and supported by Indian communists who had sent cadres to Britain to organise migrant workers there. In the early 1970s the Birmingham branch of the IWA (Jagmohan Joshi) had hosted meetings with visiting members of the American Black Panthers; and the Racial Action Adjustment Society, headed by the Caribbean-born Michael Abdul Malik (née Michael de Freitas), had in turn supported one of the first IWA strikes in 1965, at Red Scar Mill in Preston. So in some ways these second-generation youth were following a tradition that had been established through anti-imperialist struggle by members of the previous generation.

By focusing on racism rather than fascism, the AYMs and other independent black organisations were stressing the normalisation of racial inequality within society, which gave oxygen to fascist views. They argued that if you addressed racism, fascism would automatically be challenged. This was counterposed to the Anti-Nazi League's focus on anti-fascism, which failed to highlight the state's role in the fostering and perpetuation of racism. In drawing on the memory of the British state's challenge to Nazism during the Second World War, the ANL was diminishing

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any acknowledgement of the state's part in colonial and racial oppression, one terrible example of which had occurred during the war itself, in 1943 - the man-made Bengal famine, when Britain exported rice to feed British troops, leading to a famine in which over three million Bengalis died.

### Resilience, resistance and method

For the AYMs, representing the plight of their communities was not a choice but a necessity. They saw their friends criminalised by the police, and the pain of families divided by the immigration laws. Thus the aims and objectives of AYM (Bradford), the largest and most influential of the Asian Youth Movements, emphasised the promotion of 'the interests of young people from (or originating from) the Indian sub-continent', and 'challenging all forms of discrimination', particularly racism, but did not see these as separate from the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. One of their aims was 'to educate and show the youth the relationship between discrimination and inequality and the social system existing in Britain'. By keeping the interests of the community at the centre of their concerns, rather than those of particular political parties, they were able to highlight the racism of both the Tory and the Labour governments, which had each been instrumental in the consolidation of discriminatory immigration laws. As one of the slogans used by Bradford, Manchester, Birmingham and Sheffield proclaimed: 'Labour Tory both the same, both play the racist game'. While the AYMs were not sectarian, and were willing to build broad-based alliances, they also believed it was important to recognise the political games that Labour had played, protesting against immigration restrictions in opposition and then tightening those very same laws when in power. One example of this was Labour's 1968 Immigration Act, steamrolled through parliament in three days in order to establish the new citizenship category of 'new Commonwealth', and thus to keep out the growing numbers of Kenyan Asian refugees who held British passports.

But though they condemned the racism of the Labour Party, as grassroots campaigners they recognised the importance of working within the wider labour and trade union movement. They encouraged young people to join trade unions, recognising that 'the only real force in British society capable of fighting racialism and the growth of organised racism and fascism is the unity of the workers

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movement - black and white'.<sup>6</sup> While encouraging members to join trade unions, they simultaneously encouraged members to challenge the racism they encountered within them. Older members of the youth movements had participated in such a challenge in the community support committees established during the Imperial Typewriters strike of 1974. And they had also witnessed the power of united action at Grunwick in 1976, when the miners' unions played an important part in the strong labour movement support for the strikers. The AYMs never intended to isolate themselves from the wider labour movement. Membership of political parties, however, was not accepted in the early days, and in Bradford those joining the AYM were asked to give up such affiliations to prevent the group from becoming caught up in the political imperatives of those parties. Through their independent position, the AYMs wished to provide an organised voice that raised the concerns of a community, with the aim of working as equals with other organisations in the struggle against all forms of discrimination.

Two campaigns in particular enable us to explore the AYMs' methods, their key concerns and the achievements from which we can take inspiration today: the Anwar Ditta Defence Campaign and the Bradford 12 Defence Campaign.

### **The Anwar Ditta Defence Campaign**

The case of Anwar Ditta shows how the AYMs often worked to turn cases into campaign issues, in order to highlight structural inequalities as well as winning a battle, through both political and legal means. Anwar Ditta was born in Birmingham, but in 1962, when she was nine years old, her parents separated and she was sent to live in Pakistan. While living there she was married and had three children, Kamran, Imran and Saima. In 1975 she and her husband decided to return to England, leaving the three children temporarily in Pakistan while they found work and a place to live. On her return to Britain, in the belief that their Islamic marriage would not be recognised under English law, Anwar and her husband remarried. This was to prove a costly mistake, since, when they came to apply for their children to be able to join them in the UK, the Home Office declared that there was 'no clear evidence of Anwar Sultana Ditta ever having been in Pakistan'. They asserted that 'there might be two Anwar Dittas, i.e. one who married Shuja-u-din in Pakistan in 1968 and the other who Shuja-u-din married in the United Kingdom in 1975'. Permission was withheld

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and in 1980 Anwar also lost her appeal to allow the children to enter Britain. This was despite the fact that her case had been taken up by the South Manchester Law Centre, and was supported by the some sections of the left and the AYMs.

Although no legal avenue now remained, the youth movements refused to give up. They employed a new legal representative, who worked with them in raising the profile of Anwar's case. As far as they were concerned, if the law was unjust then it needed to be changed. Rather than organising a campaign on Anwar's behalf, the AYMs placed her at the centre of the campaign, and through the campaign she learned more about the immigration laws and the history of racism and colonialism, and became more politicised. At the beginning of the campaign she was a traditional housewife, but she gradually became a prolific speaker and campaigner - who, in the words of Tariq Mehmood, 'could reduce a meeting of 500 men to tears'.<sup>7</sup> Anwar spoke in student unions, in law firms, and in trade union and other political meetings up and down the country, as well as on the beach at Blackpool, and at demonstrations and street meetings.

While welcoming support from celebrities and politicians, the campaign was firmly rooted in the community, which provided a bedrock of support that was not susceptible to the fickle whims of publicity or the political interests of others. They raised funds through socials that also galvanised support, and they also used the case to highlight the wider issue of discriminatory immigration laws, and raise the profile of the campaign against the proposed Nationality Act of 1981, which would remove the right to citizenship of children born in the UK, unless their parents or grandparents had British citizenship. This was another piece of legislation - this time introduced by the Tories - aimed at keeping out non-white citizens.

The unremitting commitment of both Anwar and the AYMs eventually led to an investigation into the case by Jane Leighton, a progressive Granada TV journalist, for a *World in Action* programme entitled 'These are my children'. Travelling to Pakistan along with the campaign's solicitor Ruth Bundy, to take blood tests from the children and affidavits from family members, priests and others, Leighton produced a programme that proved Anwar was telling the truth. Following its broadcast in March 1981 the Home Office gave Anwar the right to bring her children to Britain. The movement's determination, creativity and selfless pursuit of justice, along with their method of working that placed victims in the centre of the campaigns, meant that, once she had won, Anwar had become a campaigner who spoke in defence of

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others. She not only defended others struggling against the immigration laws (using the press moment of her children's arrival, for example, to draw attention to the plight of Nasira Begum), but also spoke in support of the anti-apartheid movement and worked with organisations in support of women's liberation. Through her campaign and the solidarity the AYM's built with others struggling against injustice, they established a network of support that was to prove essential in the landmark case of the Bradford 12.

## **Bradford 12 Campaign**

The Bradford 12 campaign highlights another key area that the youth movements organised around - the right to defend themselves. The defence of their communities against racist violence and police criminalisation of black communities had been a key reason for the establishment of the youth movements. At the beginning of 1981 there was a steep rise in racist attacks, including the killing of Parveen Khan and her three children when her house in Walthamstow was firebombed and the deaths of thirteen young African Caribbean children at a party in New Cross, South London after a firebomb had been thrown into the house; and there had been rioting at the Hambrough Tavern in Southall after a series of racist incidents there. In July 1981, at a time when unrest was exploding across the country, members of the United Black Youth League - a splinter group from AYM (Bradford) - decided to make petrol bombs (though these were never used), in order 'to be prepared should the need arise, to protect themselves and their community against fascists'.<sup>8</sup> Three weeks later, on 28 July, over a dozen of their members were arrested, and twelve young men were charged with making an explosive substance with intent to endanger life and property, as well as conspiracy to make explosives for unlawful purposes.

The political nature of the trial, which took place in Leeds, was evident from the involvement of special branch in the arrests and interrogation of the twelve, as well as in the bail conditions, which excluded them from participating in any political meetings or demonstrations, and forced one leading defendant to live outside of Bradford. Because the twelve were charged with conspiracy, the case was seen as a direct attempt by the state to criminalise political activists who had for five years been campaigning - through legal means - to defend their communities. The campaign to defend the twelve exposed the failure of police both in Bradford



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and across the country to protect black communities, and highlighted police racism, including the exposure of statements from the force that suggested that 'Police officers must be prejudiced and discriminatory to do their job ... searching West Indian youth wearing tea cosy hats and loitering in city centres could detect mugging offences', and declarations by police officers that there was no such thing as racial violence. It was a political trial which, following the acquittal of all the defendants, was to enshrine in law the right of a community to self-defence. 'I am not a terrorist', as defendant Tariq Mehmood declared in his summing up speech, 'but a victim of terror'.

The significance of the Bradford 12 case lay in the development of a mass campaign in their defence; the challenge that was made to the jury selection process to ensure 'a jury of your peers'; the decision by Tariq Mehmood to defend himself; the decision to argue a case for self defence by a community; the decision by the young defendants to make statements read from the dock and not to be cross-examined - a right that has now been removed; and the strong links that were established between the campaign and the lawyers who defended the twelve.

The case highlighted the value of working with progressive lawyers to expose the state's efforts to criminalise those that challenged its oppressive tactics and politics. The liaison between the campaign and legal team ensured that the jury selection procedure was effectively challenged to ensure a fair trial, and campaigners also carried out research into racist attacks in Britain during 1981, producing a comprehensive report to support the legal team's presentation of a detailed picture of the racial violence and fear experienced by black communities. Run by activists in Bradford, Leeds and London who had worked with the leading members of the Bradford 12 on the Anwar Ditta Defence Campaign; the Campaign against the Nationality Bill; community defence campaigns such as the Southall Defence Campaign; strike support committees, as well as international solidarity protests against apartheid, Bloody Sunday, and the massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila, the campaign was able to garner a wide range of support. Support groups operated in London, Bradford, Leeds, Sheffield and Manchester, as well as other towns and cities. Following the acquittal, the defence campaigns in Sheffield and Birmingham became the foundation stones for AYMs in those cities. Trades Councils and a variety of left organisations also supported the campaign, and Dave Stark, an active member of Bradford Trades Council, coordinated the campaign's

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*Report on racist violence in Bradford.* The support group in Leeds was partly steered by left groups such as Big Flame, and was supported by local independent media outlets such as *Leeds Other Paper*, who produced pamphlets for public circulation to challenge the mainstream media image of the twelve as a 'Black Gang in plot to bomb police'. It would be incorrect to suggest that differences and conflicts did not exist. The Asian Youth Movement in Bradford had already split because of differences over whether or not it was right to take state funding (see note 8). Members of the United Black Youth League had left and formed a new organisation in which African and Asian youth would organise together, independent of state sponsorship, in the belief that 'a people's organisation should only ever be responsible to the people'. But despite such differences AYM members from Bradford worked as individuals in the Defence Campaign, uniting against the police criminalisation of activists.

The campaign exposed police corruption and racism and is testament to the power of people's solidarity. In a celebratory pamphlet produced after the acquittal by *Leeds Other Paper*, just under 300 organisations are listed as having offered support, including black organisations, migrant organisations, trades councils, students unions, Labour Party branches, anti-deportation campaigns, national liberation organisations, socialist bookshops, feminist organisations, churches, mosques, temples and gurdwaras.<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, the case made clear the power of political organisation, and that when people are organised and work together they can fight and win.

### Reflections

The independence of the youth movements from both political parties and local councils was an important factor in their early success. Through this process they were not distracted by the political agendas of other organisations. They did not expect the state to sponsor their liberation, and retained a commitment to an anti-imperialist perspective. When funds became available following the urban unrest in England in 1981, some of the youth movements were deflected into service provision - including the running of youth clubs, cricket tournaments and community centres. This contrasted with the independent political campaigning that they had focused on in their early days, which had exposed and challenged injustice and violence both within the state and on the street. Even where it was

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possible to use funds to support campaigns, activists became aware of the ways in which the funding disintegrated their organisational work in mobilising support. As one member, Zulfiqar, noted: 'Manchester City Council took a decision to provide coaches for immigration cases, so coaches were going free. You just informed them - we want to take a coach to Birmingham. And the number of people going on demonstrations began to fall. I remember there were coaches that would have eight or ten people going to Birmingham or London or Bradford for demonstrations. When you are trying to get the money yourself to take a coach you do much more work, now the only work was - publicise the coach - "hey the coach will be going from Longsight at such and such a time" - and no work was done.'<sup>10</sup>

While funding provided resources through which communities could access services from which they had previously felt excluded, it was also influential in encouraging the identification of cultural difference (since this was used as a criterion in the process of application), as well as in re-directing energy into activities that were less overtly political. Some local government organisations, such as the GLC, went beyond the growing multi-cultural agenda that emerged in the 1980s, to focus on anti-racism, including its declaration of an anti-racism year in 1984. But though the achievements of the GLC were not insignificant, since they trebled the number of black staff in middle-ranking positions, this municipal anti-racism limited the kinds of issues taken up by the black community.<sup>11</sup> As a Bradford Council report noted: 'there is now a greater appreciation amongst the ethnic minorities of both the limitations of the local authority and its powers. Expressions of demand are more realistic and well thought out'. Thus from the mid-1980s onwards, the AYM in Bradford focused on addressing council-led agendas such as education, rather than challenging police racism.<sup>12</sup>

Shifting subcontinental politics also impacted on communities: the rise of the Khalistan movement led to an increase in Sikh nationalism amongst British Sikh youth in the mid-1980s, and Hindu chauvinist groups such as the VHP also increased their influence. And the increasing significance of religious organisations also derived from their success in securing local government grants, because they were more conservative and were seen as unlikely to challenge government. It is important to recall the wider rise of religious organisations, in order to challenge the idea that it was Muslims who were responsible for the 'retreat' into a religious identity. Politically, a Muslim identity became increasingly inevitable after the

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massacre of Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina under the eye of UN security forces in the 1990s, the attacks on Iraq in the two Gulf wars, and the continuing conflict in Palestine, which left Muslims feeling that they had been singled out. Having been persecuted as Muslims, many, including some former members of the AYMs, have turned towards Islam. In defending other Muslims they have continued the AYMs' defence of those that suffer racism: the questions that have motivated them remain the same - injustice in the world, the increasing pauperisation of the Global South, and the racism, deprivation and criminalisation experienced in their local communities. But increasingly, solidarity and support has been thin on the ground - for example for those suffering as a result of anti-terror legislation.

Throughout the history of our communities, going as far back as the Indian uprisings of 1857, we have witnessed measures by British imperialism to divide and rule us. The uprisings that spread across North India in 1857 following the execution of Mangal Pandey, a sepoy in the Indian army who refused to use the newly issued cartridges containing pig and cow fat, showed a resistance that was united across religious boundaries. Britain's response in 1857 - apart from terror and repression - was to institute division between Muslims and Hindus, describing the uprisings as 'a Muslim conspiracy' despite the evidence of unity between communities. The fracturing of united resistances to racism and imperialism in the late twentieth century can be seen as an effective re-articulation of this continued policy of divide and rule.

In spite of all this, the Asian Youth Movements highlighted the possibility of speaking truth to power. They challenged the tactics of divide and rule through their broad-based alliances, while embracing the right of oppressed peoples to organise independently in order to have their voice heard. 'It may be', as Gareth Pierce, solicitor for six of the Bradford 12 reflected in relation to the 12, 'that they held the line on racist attacks ... maybe they held the line on the NF growing and growing and becoming a monster ... but whenever there is a victory it doesn't result in living happily ever after, it results in the state moving the goal posts yet again and so it's imperative to be as brave and as watchful and as intelligent and as imaginative as the twelve defendants were in their days in Bradford'. Pierce's reflections highlight the impossibility of looking to history in order to reproduce it, but there are important lessons that we can learn about the power of solidarity between oppressed groups and the value of independent political organisation outside of state structures. It

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was, as Amrit Wilson remembered, 'a period of intense struggle'. 'There was a lot of repression but people did actually fight back ... The campaigns were ours, they were not run by professionals, we owned them and were propelled by a sense of justice which gave rise to a very powerful solidarity'.<sup>13</sup> Most importantly the AYMs teach us that it is possible to fight and win.

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## Notes

1. See: [www.tandana.org](http://www.tandana.org); and A. Ramamurthy, 'The Politics of Britain's Asian Youth Movements', *Race and Class* 48(2) 2006; and *Black Star: Britain's Asian Youth Movements*, Pluto Press 2013.
2. CARF/Southall Rights *Southall: The Birth of a black community*, Institute of Race Relations 1981.
3. R. Miles & A. Phizakelea, *White 'an's Country*, Pluto Press 1984.
4. Anandi Ramamurthy, 'South Asian mobilisation in two northern cities: a comparison of Manchester and Bradford Asian youth movements', *Ethnicity and Race in a Changing World*, 2 (2) 2011.
5. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press 1963.
6. *Kala Tara*, paper of the Asian Youth Movement, Bradford 1980, p13.
7. Tariq Mehmood interview, conducted by the author in 2006.
8. The United Black Youth League was formed following a debate in the Asian Youth Movement about whether the organisation should apply for state funds. Those that left to later form the UBYL had argued that 'a people's organisation should only be answerable to the people'.
9. [tandana.org](http://tandana.org) JA69.
10. Zulfiqar Mohsin interview, conducted in 2005.
11. Herman Ouseley, 'The role model of equal authority' in Ball and Solomos (eds), *Race and Local Politics*, Macmillan 1990.
12. Keith Teare, *Under Siege: Racism and Violence in Britain Today*, Penguin 1988.
13. Amrit Wilson interview, conducted by the author in 2005.