

# BANGLA FORA

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Session 1

A People On the Move:

The Rise of Asian Organising in Britain

30th November

6pm - 7.30pm



## Resource Pack



## Introduction on Bangla Fora

Bangla Fora is a common colloquial term used by the Bengali community for children's education programs that were popularised in the '70s and '80s in an effort for the Bengali community to connect and link their children to their community and culture. Our Bangla Fora will include 10 online webinars available to take live and view as recordings.

The course curriculum will develop participants' skills as community organisers and activists while grounding them in the historical context of wider bangladeshi activism in the UK. The course will mix deep dives into the history of the Bangladeshi diaspora and its activism in the 70s and 80s with training in modern anti racism techniques, digital campaigning and community outreach.

- **Link to video session:**

 **A People on the Move: The Rise of Asian Organising in Britain**

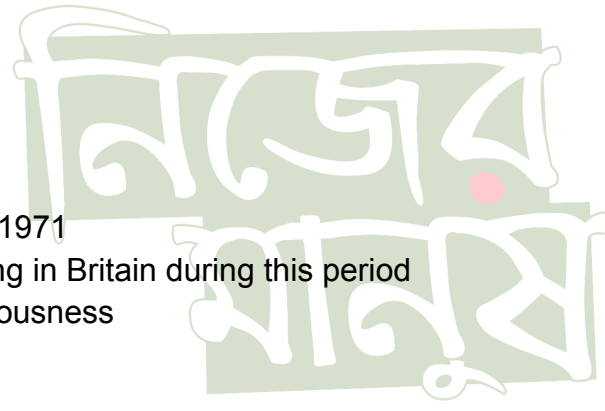
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYSEL5zD9w4>

## Session One - A People on the Move: The Rise of Asian Organising in Britain

The development of Bengali political activism in Britain in the 1970s formed part of an era from the late '60s where radical Black and Asian-led activism came into its own and wrestled with the sharpening political struggles of the time.

Alongside participating in militant confrontations with street fascists, police, local councils and oppressive employers, Bengalis in the early 1970s also extended moral and material support to Bangladeshis back home fighting for liberation and against the Pakistani government's Operation Searchlight.

This session traces the emergence of a radical Black and Asian political culture from the late 60s, the role of Bengalis in the UK in supporting Bangladeshis in 1971, and the legacy of housing struggles in London's East End.



## Lesson Objectives:

- Explore what Bengalis in the UK were doing during 1971
- Explore the wider context of Black & Asian organising in Britain during this period
- Discuss the emergence of a Bengali political consciousness

## What does Bangla Fora mean to you



## Bengalis in Britain during Bangladeshi liberation



A RESEARCH PROJECT INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LOCAL AND TRANSNATIONAL CITIZENSHIP EXPERIENCES OF BANGLADESH-ORIGIN MUSLIMS IN LONDON AND BIRMINGHAM.

This is a project Dr Fatima Rajina worked on with Dr Victoria Redclift looking at Bangladeshis and experiences of transnationalism and citizenship in Birmingham, London and Luton.

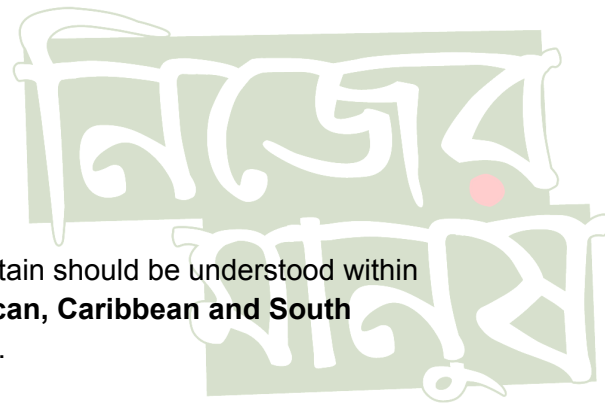
See here for more details about the project including articles, key recommendations and the findings from the data: <https://transnationalism.wixsite.com/tpls/home-1>

Some key themes:

- Organising and memorialising the Liberation War: Bangladeshis in the UK supported the movement in many ways including demonstrations, canvassing for local councillors to visit Bangladesh, providing financial support (even providing trousers as fighters were wearing longhis)
- Tension between Bangladeshis and Pakistanis: tensions did exist between the two communities, including businesses being damaged where Bangladeshis provided financial support. However, there was also feelings of unity against racists in the UK, and a need to come together for protection around this
- 'Myth of Return' turned on its head: where there was previously a belief that families would take their financial gains back to Bangladesh, the concerns around safety meant many started to bring their families here - particularly women.

Key takeaways:

- Bengali and Bangladeshi political organising had its own specificities and pattern of organising, before during and after 1971.
- But the emergence of a politicised Bengali community in Britain should be understood within the context of the time: an overall radicalisation of African, Caribbean and South Asian people in Britain.



## As radical as the times demand

- The emergence of a politicised Bengali community in Britain should be understood within the context of the time: an overall **radicalisation of African, Caribbean and South Asian communities** in Britain during the late 1960s-70s.
- **Black and Asian political organising in post-war Britain be split into three periods:**
  - 1) Post-war immigrant organising (1945-1967)
  - 2) Britain's 'Black Power' era (1967-1981)
  - 3) Post-Black Power era/emergence of multiculturalism (1981 onwards) [not covered in this session]

### Post-war immigrant organising (1945-1967)

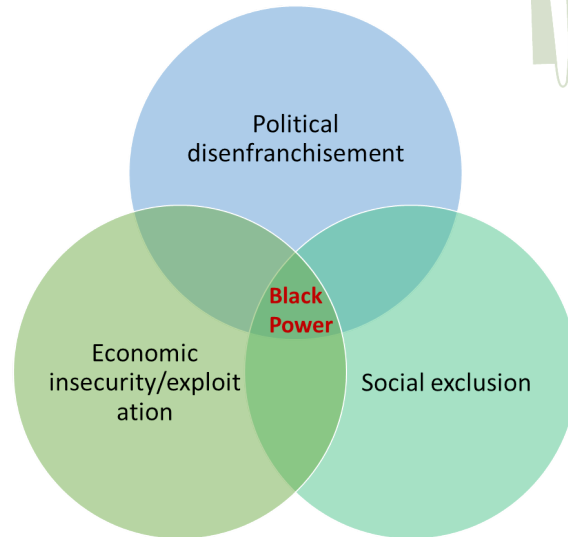
- The organisations of post-war migrants of the 'New Commonwealth' (namely: Indian subcontinent, certain countries in Africa and the Caribbean) were often tied up with politics and political institutions from back home.

They also generally worked alongside liberal antiracists and sections of the 'white left' (such as the Communist Party of Great Britain) and sections of the Labour Party.
- These organisations tended towards a more moderate position in order to maintain these broad alliances (though this of course differed from organisation to organisation).
- The high point of this era was the **formation of the organisation CARD** (Campaign Against Racial Discrimination) **and the passage of the Race Relations Act 1965** - which watered down substantially from what organisations like CARD had lobbied for.

### Britain's 'Black Power' era (1967-1981)

- As politics in Britain began to shift, a new generation emerged from 1967 - with the first Black Power organisation in Britain forming during the visit of US Black Power leader Kwame Ture.
- **Black Power was a consciousness.**

It encompassed the struggles of those groups subject to Social, Economic, and Political disenfranchisement and exclusion in Britain.  
Therefore Black Power consciousness was adopted by Caribbeans, Africans and Asians in Britain.



- During the course of the 1960s **the post-war status quo began to unravel**, leading to an era of sustained **political polarisation** and realignment.

This period saw the emergence of the socialist 'New Left', the 'New Right' and Black Power.

- During this time, **the very concept of Britain and Britishness was being redefined** – as it was being transformed from the British Empire to the modern British state.

As part of this redefinition, immigrants from the former colonies were identified as undesirable. A series of anti-immigration laws were codified during the 1960s to progressively exclude migrants from the the boundaries of Britishness.

- This anti-immigration climate was most infamously articulated by then-Conservative minister **Enoch Powell and his 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech, which called for the repatriation of immigrants.**

Powell and Powellism provided the scaffolding for the New Right - which was eventually consolidated in power by Margaret Thatcher Conservative governments from 1979.

- Black Power signalled an **ideological and generational break: it was youthful, and no longer content with moderation.**





*Race Today magazine cover June 1976 headline: 'We will not leave this country' in Bengali*

*Image courtesy of George Padmore Institute and Leila Hassan*

## Self-organisation and creating radical communities

- The concept of **self-organisation** was central to Black Power politics - groups were no longer content to play second fiddle to white comrades but organised among fellow non-white people.
- Groups differed on how far they took this however.

The more Marxist-inspired groups tended to be open to collaborating with white radicals, and saw their battles as rooted in the concept of **class struggle**. Others closed ranks and opted for more of an **'ethnic solidarity' politics**.

- We can see the limitation of this 'ethnic solidarity' politics in today's emphasis on **'representation'** - people of the same ethnic group or background do not necessarily share the same interests.

This was also becoming clear at the time, too: the famous Grunwick strike of predominantly Asian women workers found the workers in opposition to their Indian-heritage boss, as was the case with other strikes too.

- Central to self-organisation was the construction of **radical communities**.
- Black Power politics **were rooted in a 'parallel society'** by and for Black and Asian

people: from bookshops to housing campaigns to strikes - self organisation was reflected in an 'ecosystem' of their own.

- These institutions were hard fought for, and often served as flashpoints for repression by police and the British state (and the far-right).
- Examples include the Mangrove restaurant in Notting Hill (top left), subject to heavy police disruption. The Notting Hill Carnival (bottom), which in 1976 was turned into a riot by police heavy handedness.

And campaigns in the East End, including for housing and against the National Front - which produced Banglatown & Brick Lane as we know it today (top right).







## Further readings/resources

- A Safe Place To Be (documentary): <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-a-safe-place-to-be-1980-online>
- Black Britannia: Today's Anti-Racist Movement Must Remember Britain's Black Radical History, Bryan Knight (article): <https://novaramedia.com/2020/06/18/todays-anti-racist-movement-must-remember-britains-black-radical-history>
- Blacks Britannica, 1978 (documentary): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsKeRFpyKNw>
- British Black Power: The anti-imperialism of political blackness and the problem of nativist socialism, John Narayan (journal): [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332455910\\_British\\_Black\\_Power\\_The\\_anti-imperialism\\_of\\_political\\_blackness\\_and\\_the\\_problem\\_of\\_nativist\\_socialism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332455910_British_Black_Power_The_anti-imperialism_of_political_blackness_and_the_problem_of_nativist_socialism)
- Credo, 1978 (documentary): <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-credo-1978-online>
- Defending a way of life (documentary): <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-defending-a-way-of-life-1980-online>
- E1: The Grunwick strike, 1976, Working Class History (podcast): <https://workingclasshistory.com/podcast/episode-1-the-grunwick-strike-1976/>
- Here to Stay, Here to Fight: A Race Today Anthology, Ed. Paul Field, Robin Bunce, Leila Hassan and Margaret Peacock (book): <https://archive.leftove.rs/documents/AHBQ/3>
- Race Today collection (journal): [https://archive.leftove.rs/documents/grid/group/group==Race\\_Today\\_Collective](https://archive.leftove.rs/documents/grid/group/group==Race_Today_Collective)
- Tandana archives on the Asian Youth Movements (collection): [www.tandana.org](http://www.tandana.org)
- The Brown in Black Power: Militant South Asian Organizing in Post-War Britain, Arsalan Samdani (article) <https://www.jamhooor.org/read/2019/8/27/the-brown-in-black-power-militant-south-asian-organizing-in-post-war-britain>